THE BIG MOGUL

Joseph C. Lincoln

THE BIG MOGUL

By JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

THE BIG MOGUL
QUEER JUDSON
RUGGED WATER
DOCTOR NYE
FAIR HARBOR
GALUSHA THE MAGNIFICENT
THE PORTYGEE
"SHAVINGS"
MARY-'GUSTA
CAP'N DAN'S DAUGHTER
THE RISE OF ROSCOE PAINE
THE POSTMASTER
THE WOMAN HATERS
KEZIAH COFFIN
CY WHITTAKER'S PLACE
CAP'N ERI
EXTRICATING OBADIAH
THANKFUL'S INHERITANCE
MR. PRATT
MR. PRATT'S PATIENTS
KENT KNOWLES: "QUAHAUG"
CAP'N WARREN'S WARDS
THE DEPOT MASTER
OUR VILLAGE
PARTNERS OF THE TIDE
THE OLD HOME HOUSE
CAPE COD BALLADS
THE MANAGERS

The Big Mogul

by

Joseph C. Lincoln

Author of "Queer Judson," "Rugged Water,"
"Shavings," etc.

D. Appleton and Company
New York 1926 London

COPYRIGHT, 1926, BY
D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

Copyright, 1926, by The Crowell Publishing Company
PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

THE BIG MOGUL

THE BIG MOGUL

CHAPTER I

THIS was the library of the Townsend mansion in Harniss. Mrs. Townsend had so christened it when the mansion was built; or, to be more explicit, the Boston architect who drew the plans had lettered the word "Library" inside the rectangle indicating the big room, just as he had lettered "Drawing-Room" in the adjoining, and still larger, rectangle, and Mrs. Townsend had approved both plans and lettering. In the former, and much smaller, home of the Townsends there had been neither library nor drawing-room, the apartments corresponding to them were known respectively as the "sitting-room" and the "parlor." When the little house was partially demolished and the mansion took its place the rechristened sitting-room acquired two black walnut bookcases and a dozen "sets," the latter resplendent in morocco and gilt. Now the gilt letters gleamed dimly behind the glass in the light from the student lamp upon the marble-topped center table beside which Foster Townsend was sitting, reading a Boston morning newspaper. It was six o'clock in the afternoon of a dark day in the fall of a year late in the seventies.

The student lamp was a large one and the light from beneath its green shade fell upon his head and shoulders as he sat there in the huge leather easy-chair. Most of the furniture in the library was stiff and expensive and uncomfortable. The easy chair was expensive also, but it was comfortable. Foster Townsend had chosen it himself when the mansion was furnished and it was the one item upon which his choice remained fixed and irrevocable.

"But it is so big and—and *homely,* dear," remonstrated his

wife. "It doesn't look—well, genteel enough for a room in a house like ours. Now, truly, do you think it does?"

Her husband, his hat on the back of his head and his hands in his trousers' pockets, smiled.

"Maybe not, Bella," he replied. "It is big, I'll grant you that, and I shouldn't wonder if it was homely. But so far as that goes I'm big and homely myself. It fits me and I like it. You can have all the fun you want with the rest of the house; buy all the doodads and pictures and images and story-books and trash that you've a mind to, but I want that chair and I'm going to have it. A sitting-room is a place to sit in and I mean to sit in comfort."

"But it isn't a sitting-room, Father," urged Arabella. "It is a library. I do wish you wouldn't forget that."

"All right. I don't care what you call it, so long as you let me sit in it the way I want to. That chair's sold, young man," he added, addressing the attentive representative of the furniture house. "Now, Mother, what's the next item on the bill of lading?"

The leather chair came to the library of the Townsend mansion and its purchaser had occupied it many, many afternoons and evenings since. He was occupying it now, his bulky figure filling it to repletion and his feet, of a size commensurate to the rest of him, resting upon an upholstered footstool—a "cricket" he would have called it. A pair of gold-rimmed spectacles were perched upon the big nose before his gray eyes and the stump of a cigar was held tightly in the corner of his wide, thin lipped, grimly humorous mouth. He was dressed in a dark blue suit, wore a stiff-bosomed white shirt, a low "turn down" collar and a black, ready-made bow tie. Below the tie, a diamond stud glittered in the shirt bosom. His boots—he had them made for him by the village shoemaker—were of the, even then, old-fashioned, long-legged variety, but their leather was of the softest and best obtainable. Upon the third finger of his left hand—stubby, thick hands they were—another diamond, set in a heavy gold ring, flashed as he turned the pages of the paper. His hair was a dark brown

and it and his shaggy brows and clipped chin beard were sprinkled with gray.

There was another chair at the other side of the table, a rocking-chair, upholstered in fashionable black haircloth and with a lace "tidy" upon its back. That chair was empty. It had been empty for nearly a month, since the day when Arabella Townsend was taken ill. It was pathetically, hauntingly empty now, for she who had been accustomed to occupy it was dead. A little more than a week had elapsed since her funeral, an event concerning which Eben Wixon, the undertaker, has been vaingloriously eloquent ever since.

"Yes, sir-ee!" Mr. Wixon was wont to proclaim with the pride of an artist. "That was about the most luxurious funeral ever held in this county, if I do say it. I can't think of anything to make it more perfect, unless, maybe, to have four horses instead of two haulin' the hearse. That would have put in what you might call the finishin' touch. Yes, sir, 'twould! Still, I ain't findin' fault. I'm satisfied. The music—and the flowers! And the high-toned set of folks sittin' around all over the lower floor of that big house! Some of 'em was out in the dinin' room, they was. If I had half the cash represented at that Townsend funeral I'd never need to bury anybody else in *this* world. I bet you I wouldn't, I'd have enough."

Foster Townsend read his paper, became interested in a news item, smiled, raised his head and, turning toward the vacant rocker, opened his lips to speak. Then he remembered and sank back again into his own chair. The paper lay unheeded upon his knees and he stared absently at a figure in the Brussels carpet on the floor of the library.

A door in the adjoining room—the dining room—opened and Nabby Gifford, the Townsend housekeeper, entered from the kitchen. She lit the hanging lamp above the dining room table and came forward to draw the portières between that room and the library. Standing with the edge of a curtain in each hand, she addressed her employer.

"Kind of a hard old evenin', ain't it, Cap'n Townsend," she observed. "It's rainin' now but I declare if it don't feel as if it might snow afore it gets through."

Foster Townsend did not answer, nor did he look up. Mrs. Gifford tried again.

"Anything 'special in the paper?" she inquired. "Ain't found out who murdered that woman up to Watertown yet, I presume likely?"

He heard her this time.

"Eh?" he grunted, raising his eyes. "No, I guess not. I don't know. I didn't notice. What are you doing in the dining room, Nabby? Where's Ellen?"

"She's out. It's her night off. She was all dressed up in her best bib and tucker and so I judged she was goin' somewheres. I asked her where, but she never said nothin', made believe she didn't hear me. Don't make much odds; I can 'most generally guess a riddle when I've got the answer afore-hand. There's an Odd Fellers' ball over to Bayport to-night and that Georgie D.'s home from fishin', so I cal'late—"

Townsend interrupted. "All right, all right," he put in, gruffly. "I don't care where she's gone. Pull those curtains, will you, Nabby."

"I was just a-goin' to . . . Say, Cap'n Townsend, don't you think it's kind of funny the way that woman's husband is actin'—that Watertown woman's, I mean? He *says* he wan't to home the night she was murdered but he don't say where he was. Now, 'cordin' to what I read in yesterday's *Advertiser—*"

"All right, all right! Pull those curtains. . . . Here! Wait a minute. Where's Varunas?"

"He's out to the barn, same as he usually is, I guess likely. He spends more time with them horses than he does with me, I know that. I say to him sometimes, I say: 'Anybody'd think a horse could talk the way you keep company with 'em. Seems as if you *liked* to be with critters that can't talk.' "

"Perhaps he does—for a change. Well, if he comes in tell

him I want to see him. You can call me when supper's ready. Now, if you'll pull those curtains—"

The curtains were snatched together with a jerk and a rattle of rings on the pole. From behind them sounded the click of dishes and the jingle of silver. Foster Townsend sank back into the leather chair. His cigar had gone out, but he did not relight it. He sat there, gazing at nothing in particular, a gloomy frown upon his face.

The door leading from the rear of the front hall opened just a crack. Through the crack came a whisper in a hoarse masculine voice.

"Cap'n Foster!" whispered the voice. "Cap'n Foster! . . . Ssst! Look here!"

Townsend turned, looked and saw a hand with a beckoning forefinger thrust from behind the door. He recognized the hand and lifting his big body from the chair, walked slowly across the room.

"Well, Varunas," he asked, "what's the matter now? What are you sneaking in through the skipper's companion for?"

A head followed the hand around the edge of the door, the head of Varunas Gifford. Varunas was Nabby Gifford's husband. He was stableman on the Townsend estate, took care of the Townsend horses, and drove his employer's trotters and pacers in the races at the county fairs and elsewhere. He was a little, wizened man, with stooped shoulders and legs bowed like barrel hoops. His thin, puckered face puckered still more as he whispered a cautious reply.

"Cap'n Foster," he whispered, "can you just step out in the hall here a minute? I've got somethin' to tell ye and if I come in there Nabby's liable to hear us talkin' and want to know what it's all about. Come out just a minute, can ye?"

Townsend motioned him back, followed him into the dimly lighted hall and closed the door behind them.

"Well, here I am," he said. "What's the matter?"

Varunas rubbed his unshaven chin. His fingers among the bristles sounded like the rasp of sandpaper.

"You know Claribel?" he began anxiously.

Claribel was the fastest mare in the Townsend stable. The question, therefore, was rather superfluous. Claribel's owner seemed to consider it so.

"Don't waste your breath," he ordered. "What's the matter with her?"

Varunas shook his head violently. "Ain't nothin' the matter with her," he declared. "She's fine. Only—well, you see—"

"Come, come! Throw it overboard!"

"Well, I was cal'latin' to take her down to the Circle tomorrow mornin' early—about six or so; afore anybody was up, you know—and try her out. Them was your orders, Cap'n, you remember."

"Of course I remember. I was going to remind you of it. You're going to do it, aren't you?"

"I was cal'latin' to, but—well, I heard somethin' a spell ago that made me think maybe I hadn't better. I've been give to understand that—" he leaned forward to whisper once more—"that there'd be somebody else there at the same time me and Claribel was. Um-hum. Somebody that's cal'latin' to find out somethin'."

Foster Townsend's big hands, pushed into his trousers pockets, jingled the loose change there. He nodded.

"I see," he said, slowly. "Yes, yes, I see. Somebody named Baker, I shouldn't wonder. Eh?"

Varunas nodded. "Somebody that works for somebody named somethin' like that," he admitted. "You see, Cap'n, I was down to the blacksmith shop a couple of hours ago—got to have Flyaway shod pretty soon—and me and Joe Ellis was talkin' about one thing or 'nother, and says he: 'Varunas,' he says, 'when is the old man and Sam Baker goin' to pull off that private horse trot of theirs?' he says. Course everybody knows that us and Sam have fixed up that match and it's the general notion that there's consider'ble money up on it. Some folks say it's a hundred dollars and some says it's five hundred. *I* never tell 'em how much 'tis, because—"

"Because you don't know. Well, never mind that. Go on."

"Yup . . . Um-hum . . . Well, anyhow, all hands knows that our Claribel and his Rattler is goin' to have it out and Joe he wanted to know when 'twas goin' to be. I told him next week some day and then he says: 'I understand you've been takin' the mare down to the Circle and givin' her time trials in the mornin's afore anybody else is up.' Well, that kind of knocked me. I never suspicioned anybody did know, did you, Cap'n?"

"I told you to take pains that they didn't. You haven't done it but once. Who saw you then?"

"Why, nobody, so I'd have been willin' to bet. I never see anybody around. Lonesome's all git out 'tis down there that time in the mornin'. And dark, too. How Joe or anybody else knew I had Claribel down there yesterday was more'n I could make out."

"Well, never mind. It looks as if they did know. Did Ellis tell you what time the mare made?"

"No. But he give me to understand that Seth Emmons, Baker's man, was figgerin' to come over from Bayport and be somewheres in that neighborhood to-morrer mornin', and every mornin', till he found out. Joe wouldn't tell me who told him, but he said 'twas a fact. Now what had I better do? It's the story 'round town that Rattler has made 2:20 or better and that the best Claribel can do is in the neighborhood of 2:35. If folks knew she'd made 2:18½ around that Circle Baker might have Rattler took sick or somethin' and the whole business would be called off. I've known his horses to be took down in a hurry afore, when he was toler'ble sure to lose. When you're dealin' with Sam Baker you're up against a slick article, and that man of his, Seth Emmons, is just as up and comin'. I better not show up at that Circle to-morrow mornin', had I, Cap'n Foster?"

Townsend, hands in pockets, took a turn up and down the hall. His horses were his pet hobbies. Besides the span of blacks which he was accustomed to drive about town and which, with the nobby brougham or carryall or dogcart which

they drew, were the admiration and boastful pride of Harniss, he owned a half-dozen racers. At the Ostable County Fair and Cattle Show in October the Townsend entries usually carried off the majority of first prizes. They were entered, also, at the fair in New Bedford and sometimes as far away as Taunton. Between fairs there were numbers of by-races with other horse owners in neighboring towns. A good trotter was a joy to Foster Townsend and a sharply contested trotting match his keenest enjoyment. The Townsend trotters were as much talked about as the famous and long drawn out Townsend-Cook lawsuit. The suit was won, or seemed to be. The highest court in Massachusetts had recently decided it in Foster Townsend's favor. Bangs Cook's lawyers were reported to have entered motion of appeal and it was said that they intended carrying it to the Supreme Court at Washington, but few believed their appeal would be granted.

Sam Baker was an old rival of his on the tracks. Baker was the hotel keeper and livery man at Bayport, ten miles away. He was not accounted rich, like Townsend, but he was well to do, a shrewd Yankee and a "sport." The trotter Rattler was a recent acquisition of his and a fast one, so it was said. He had challenged Townsend's mare Claribel to a mile trot on the "Circle," the track which Townsend had built and presented to the town. It was a quarter mile round of hard clay road constructed on the salt meadows near the beach at South Harniss. A lonely spot with no houses near it, it was then. Now a summer hotel and an array of cottages stand on or near it. Foster Townsend used it as an exercise ground for his trotters, but anyone else was accorded the same privilege. In the winter, when the snow was packed hard, it was the spot where the dashing young fellow in a smart cutter behind a smart horse took his best girl for a ride and the hope of an impromptu race with some other dashing young fellow similarly equipped.

Varunas Gifford watched his employer pace up and down the

hall, watched him adoringly but anxiously. After a moment he returned to repeat his question.

"Better not be down to the Circle to-morrow mornin', had I, Cap'n?" he suggested.

Townsend stopped in his stride. "Yes," he said, with decision. "I want you to be there."

"Eh? Why, good land! If that Seth Emmons is there spyin' and keepin' time on Claribel, why—"

"Sshh! Wait! I want you to be there, but I don't want the mare to be there. Is Hornet all right for a workout?"

"Sartin sure he's all right. But Hornet can't do better'n 2:40 if he spreads himself, not on that Circle track anyhow. You ain't cal'latin' to haul out Claribel and put in Hornet, be you? There wouldn't be no sense in that, Cap'n, not a mite. Why—"

"Oh, be quiet! If he does 2:45 it will suit me just as well, provided that is the best you can make him do. You say it's dark down there at six o'clock?"

"Dark enough, even if it's a fine mornin', this time of year. A mornin' like to-day's—yes, and the way it looks as if to-morrow's would be—it's so dark you can't much more'n see to keep in the road."

"All right. The darker the better. If it's dark to-morrow morning you hitch Hornet in the gig and go down there and send him a mile as fast as he can travel. He is the same build and size as Claribel, about, and the same color."

"Eh? . . . Gosh!" Varunas' leathery face split with a broad grin. "Yus—yus," he observed, "I see what you're up to, Cap'n Foster. You figger that Sam Emmons 'll see me sendin' Hornet around the Circle and he'll take it for granted—Eh! But no, I'm afraid 'twon't be dark enough for that. Hornet *is* the same size and color as Claribel but he ain't marked the same. Claribel's got that white splash between her eyes and that white stockin' on her left hind laig. Hornet he ain't got no white on him nowheres. If 'twas the middle of the night Sam might be fooled, but—"

"Sshh! You've been whitewashing the henhouses this week, haven't you? And as the job isn't finished, I imagine you've got some of the whitewash left. If you have, and *if* you've got any gumption at all, I should think you could splash a horse white wherever he needed to be white and do it well enough to fool anybody on a dark morning, particularly if he wasn't on the lookout for a trick. You could do that on a pinch, couldn't you?"

Mr. Gifford's grin, which had disappeared, came back again, broader than ever.

"I shouldn't be surprised to death if I could," he chuckled. "I see—yus, yus, I see! Sam he'll see Hornet all whitewashed up like a cellar door and he won't be suspicionin' nothin' but Claribel, and so when Hornet can't do no better than 2:40 or 2:45 he'll naturally—Hi! that's cute, that is! Yes, yes, I see now."

"Well, I'm glad you do. Go ahead and do your whitewashing. Whitewash isn't like paint, it comes off easy."

From behind the closed door of the library a sharp voice called: "Cap'n Townsend! Cap'n Townsend! Supper's ready!"

Varunas started. "I must be goin'," he whispered. "Don't tell her about it, Cap'n Foster, will ye. She'll pester me to death to find out what's up and if I don't tell her, she—But say!" he added admiringly, "that is about as slick a trick as ever I heard of, that whitewashin' is. How did you ever come to think that up all by yourself?"

Foster Townsend, his hand on the knob of the dining room door, grunted.

"I didn't think it up all by myself," he said, curtly. "There's nothing new about it. It's an old trick, as old as horse racing. I remembered it, that's all, and I guess it is good enough to fool any of Sam Baker's gang. You can tell me to-morrow how it worked."

He opened the door, crossed the library and sat down in his

chair at the lonely supper table. Nabby Gifford brought in the eatables and set them before him.

"I made you a fish chowder to-night, Cap'n Foster," she said. "I know you always liked it and we ain't had one for a long time. Ezra Nickerson had some real nice tautog that his boy had just caught out by the spar buoy and there's no kind of fish makes as good chowder as a tautog. Now I do hope you'll eat some of it. You ain't ate enough the last week to keep a canary bird goin'. You'll be sick fust thing you know."

Townsend dipped his spoon in the chowder and tasted approvingly.

"Good enough!" he declared. "Tastes like old times. Seems like old times to have you waiting on table, too, Nabby. Mother always liked your fish chowders."

Mrs. Gifford nodded. "I know she did," she agreed. "Time and time again I've heard her say there was nobody could make a chowder like me. Um-hum. Oh, well! We're here to-day and to-morrow the place thereof don't know us, as it says in the Bible. Ah, hum-a-day! . . . Speakin' of waitin' on table," she added, noting the expression on his face, "I wanted to talk to you about that, Cap'n Townsend. There ain't any reasons why I shouldn't do it all the time. You don't need two hired help in that kitchen now any more than a codfish needs wings. Ellen, she and that Georgie D. of hers will be gettin' married pretty soon—leastways all hands says they will—and when she quits you mustn't hire anybody in her place. If I can't get meals for one lone man then I'd better be sent to the old woman's home. You might just as well let me do it, and save your money—not that you need to save any more, land knows!"

Foster Townsend shook his head. "A pretty big house for one pair of hands to take care of," he observed. "When Ellen goes—or if she goes—you better hire some one else, Nabby."

"Now, Cap'n Foster, what's the use? What for?"

"Because I want you to, for one reason. . . . There, there, Nabby! don't argue about it. I know what I'm doing. At

any rate I guess I can spend my own money, if I want to."

"I guess you can. I don't know who's liable to stop you doin' anything you want to, far's that goes. Nobody has done it yet, though there's a good many tried. . . . But while I'm talkin' I might just as well talk a little mite more. *I* don't see why you keep on livin' in this great ark of a place. 'Tain't a bit of my business, but if *I* was you I'd sell—or rent it, or somethin'—and have a little house that I wouldn't get lost in every time I went upstairs."

Her employer shook his head. "This is my house and I stay in it," he said, crisply.

"Well, if you will you will, of course. When you bark at a body that way there ain't a mite of use barkin' back, I know that. And I realize that you and—and her that's gone had the best time in the world buildin' over this house and riggin' it up. It's just that I know how lonesome you are—a blind person could see that. . . . Here, here! You mustn't get up from that table yet, Cap'n Foster. You've got to have some more of my tautog chowder."

"No. Had enough, Nabby."

"My soul! Well, then you must have a helpin' of baked indian puddin'. I made it 'special, because I knew how you liked it. *Don't* tell me you won't touch that puddin'!"

"All right, all right. Bring it along. And I'll have another cup of tea, if you've got it."

"Got it! I've got a gallon. That Varunas man of mine would drink a hogshead of strong tea all to himself any time if I'd let him. I tell him no wonder he's all shriveled up like a wet leather apron."

She disappeared into the kitchen to return, a moment later, with the refilled cup. She was talking when she went out and talking when she came back.

"You hadn't ought to keep on livin' in this house all alone," she declared, with emphasis. "I said it afore and now I say it again. It ain't natural to live that way. It ain't good for man to be alone, that's what the Good Book says. Land sakes! afore

I'd do that I'd—I'd do the way the rich man in the—what-d'ye-call-it—parallel done. I'd go out into the highways and byways and fetch in the lame and the halt and the blind. Yes, indeed I would! I'd do it for company and I wouldn't care how halt they was, neither; they'd be better 'n nobody. Speakin' about that parallel," she added, reflectively. "I've never been real sure just what ailed a person when he was a 'halt.' A horse—mercy knows I hear horse talk enough from Varunas!—has somethin' sometimes that's called the 'spring halt,' but that, so he tells me, is a kind of lameness. Now the parallel tells about the lame *and* the halt, so—Good gracious! Why, you ain't *through,* be you, Cap'n Foster? You ain't hardly touched your puddin'."

The captain had risen and pushed back his chair. "I've eaten all I can to-night, Nabby," he said. "My appetite seems to have gone on a voyage these days and left me ashore. . . . Humph! So you think I'd better have somebody come and live here with me, do you? That's funny."

"Why is it funny? Sounds like sense to me."

"It's funny because I had just about made up my mind—Oh, well, never mind that, I'm going out pretty soon. If anyone comes to see me you can tell them I've gone."

"Where shall I say you've gone?"

"If you don't know you won't have to say it. . . . Good night."

"Shall I tell Varunas to have the carriage and team ready for you?"

"No, I'm going to walk."

"Walk! What'll people think if they see *you* out a-walkin' on your own feet like—like common folks? The idea!"

"Good night. One thing more: If the minister comes tell him I'll keep up Bella's subscription to the church the same as she did when she was here—that is, for the present, anyhow. If he says anything about my giving money toward the new steeple tell him I haven't made up my mind whether

or not the steeple is going to be rebuilt. When I do I'll let him know. . . . That's all, I guess."

He went into the library, drawing the curtains with his own hands this time. He glanced at the ornate marble and gold clock upon the mantel, decided that it was too early for his contemplated walk, and sank heavily into the leather chair. He picked up the paper from the floor, adjusted his spectacles and attempted to read. The attempt was a failure. Nothing in the closely printed pages aroused his interest sufficiently to distract his thoughts from the empty rocker at the other side of the table. He tossed the paper upon the floor again and sat there, pulling at his beard and glancing impatiently at the clock. Its gold plated hands crept from seven to seven-thirty and, at last, to ten minutes to eight. Then he rose and moved toward the front hall.

In that hall he took from the carved walnut hatstand a long ulster and a black soft hat. He had donned the ulster and was about to put on the hat when he heard Mrs. Gifford's step in the library. She was calling his name.

"Well, here I am," he answered, impatiently. "Now what?"

Nabby was out of breath, and this, together with the consciousness of the importance of her errand, did not help her toward coherence.

"I—I'm awful sorry to stop you, Cap'n Foster," she panted, "and—and of course I know you didn't want to see nobody to-night. But—but he said 'twas serious and he'd come all the way from Trumet a-purpose—and it's rainin' like all fire, too—and bein' as *'twas* him, I—well, you see, I just didn't know's I'd ought to say no—so—"

Townsend interrupted. "Who is it?" he demanded.

Nabby's tone was awe-stricken. "It's Honorable Mooney," she whispered. "Representive Mooney, that's who 'tis. He's drove all the way from Trumet, rain and all, to see you, Cap'n Foster, and he says it's dreadful important. If it had been any one else I wouldn't have let him in, but honest, when I see him standin' on the steps to the side door, lookin' just as

big and—and noble as he done when Varunas took me to that Republican rally and he made such a grand speech, I—well, I—"

Again her employer broke in.

"You *have* let him in, I take it," he said, curtly. "And of course you told him *I* was in. . . . Well, I'll give him five minutes. Send him into the sitting-room."

The Honorable Alpheus Mooney was a young man serving his first term in the Massachusetts Legislature as Representative for the Ostable County district. He was extremely anxious to continue his service there, had been renominated and was now facing the ordeal of the election which would take place early in November. His manner as he entered the library was a curious mixture of importance, deference and a slight uneasiness.

"How do you do, Cap'n Townsend?" he gushed, changing his hat from his right hand to his left and extending the former. "How do you do, sir?"

He seized the Townsend hand and shook it heartily. The captain endured the shaking rather than shared in it. He did not ask his caller to be seated.

"How are you, Mooney?" he said. "Well, what brought you over here this wet night?"

Mr. Mooney sat without waiting for an invitation. He placed his hat upon the floor, clasped his hands in his lap, unclasped them again, crossed his knees, cleared his throat, and agreed that the evening was a wet one. Townsend, still standing, thrust his own hands into his trousers pockets.

"Well, what's the matter?" he asked, dismissing the subject of the weather.

Mooney once more cleared his throat. "Oh—er—oh, nothing in particular, Cap'n," he said. "Nothing much. I was over here in Harniss and—and I thought I would drop in for a minute, that's all. I haven't seen you since your—er—sad loss—and I—er—I can't tell you how sorry I was to learn

of your bereavement. It was a great shock to me, a dreadful shock."

Townsend's face was quite expressionless. "All right," he observed. "Nabby said you wanted to see me about something important. Well?"

"Well—well, I—er—I did. Not so very important, perhaps—but. . . you were going out, weren't you, Cap'n Townsend?"

"Yes. I am going out in five minutes. Perhaps a little less."

"I wouldn't think of keeping you, Cap'n, of course not."

"All right."

"Cap'n Townsend, I—er—well, I am going to be—I am going to speak right out, as man to man. I know you would rather have me speak that way."

Townsend nodded. "There aren't any women here, as I know of," he agreed. "Go ahead and speak."

"Yes." Mr. Mooney seemed to find the "man-to-man" speaking difficult. "Well," he began, "it has come to my ears—far be it from me to say it is true; I don't believe it is, Cap'n Townsend—but I have *heard* that you weren't so very—well, anxious to see me reëlected Representative. I have heard stories that you said you didn't care whether they reëlected me or not. Now, as I say, I don't believe you ever said anything of the kind. In fact, I as good as know you didn't."

He paused and looked up eagerly, seeking confirmation of the expressed disbelief. The Townsend face was still quite expressionless, nor was the reply altogether satisfactory.

"All right," said the captain again. "If you know it, then you don't need to worry, do you?"

"No. No-o; but—you haven't said any such thing, have you, Cap'n Townsend?"

Townsend did not answer the question. He regarded his visitor with a disquieting lack of interest.

"*I* was given to understand that you said you were as good as reëlected already," he observed. "If you said that, and

believe it, then what I said or what anybody else said isn't worth fretting about, let alone cruising twelve miles in a rainstorm to find out about."

"Well, but, Cap'n Townsend—"

"Heave to a minute. See here, Mooney, you've got the Republican nomination."

"Yes. Of course I have, but—"

"Wait. And there hasn't been a Democratic Representative from this district at the state house since the sixties, has there?"

"No, but—"

"All right. Then you don't need to talk to me. If you're a Republican, ready to vote every time with your party and for the district, you are safe enough. Especially," with a slight twitch of the lip, "when you say yourself you're as good as reëlected."

This, perhaps, should have been reassuring, but apparently it was not. The Honorable Mr. Mooney shifted uneasily in his chair.

"Yes, yes, I know," he admitted. "That's all right, so far as it goes. . . . But, Cap'n Townsend, I—well, I know you aren't as—well, as strong for me as you were when I ran before. You thought, I suppose—like a good many other folks who didn't know—that I ought to have voted for that cranberry bill. You, nor they, didn't understand about that bill. That bill—well, it read all right enough, but—well, there was more to it than just reading. There were influences behind that bill that I didn't like, that's all. No honest man *could* like them."

"Um-hum. I see. Well, what was it that honest men like you didn't like about that bill? I was one of those 'influences,' behind it, I guess. It protected the cranberry growers of the Cape, didn't it? Looked out for their interests pretty well? I thought it did, and I read it before you ever saw it."

"Yes. Yes, it protected them all right. But there are other sections than the Cape, Cap'n Townsend. They're beginning to raise cranberries up around Plymouth and—and—"

"I know. And there are influences up there, too. Well, what has that cranberry bill got to do with you? You didn't vote against it. Of course you told me and a few others, before you were elected the first time, that you would vote *for* it, but you didn't do that, either. You weren't in the House when that bill came up to a vote. You'd gone fishing, I understand."

Mr. Mooney was indignant. "No such thing;" he declared, springing to his feet. "I hadn't gone fishing. I was sick. That's what I was—sick."

"Yes?" dryly. "Well, some of the rest of us were sick when we heard about it. Never mind that. The bill was defeated. Of course," he added, after a momentary interval, "it may come up again this session and Jim Needham, the Democratic candidate, says he shall vote for it, provided he's elected. But you say you're going to be elected, so what he may or may not do won't make any difference. . . . There! my five minutes are up, and more than up. I've got to go. Honest men are scarce in politics, Mooney. Maybe all hands around here will remember that on election day and forget their cranberry swamps. Maybe they will. Sorry I've got to hurry. Good night."

He was on his way to the hall door, but his visitor hurried after him and caught his arm.

"Hold on, Cap'n Townsend," he begged. "Hold on just a minute. I—I came here to tell you that—that I'd changed my mind about that bill. I—I'm going to vote for it. Yes, and I am going to work for it, too."

"Oh! . . . Well, speaking as one of those 'influences' you were talking about, I'm glad to hear you say so, of course. But you said so before. What makes you change your mind this time—change it back again, I mean? Has that honesty of yours had a relapse?"

The Honorable Mooney ignored the sarcasm. He had journeyed from Trumet in the rain to say one thing in particular and now he said it.

"Cap'n Townsend," he pleaded desperately, "you aren't going to use your influence against me, are you? There's no use beating around the bush. Everybody that knows anything knows that a word from you will change more votes than anybody else's in the county. If you say you're going to vote for Needham—well, this is a four to one Republican district, but I guess you can lick me if you want to. You won't do that, will you? I'm going to work hard to get that cranberry bill through the House; honest, I am. I was a fool last session. I realize it now. If that bill can be shoved through I'll help do it. That's the honest God's truth."

Foster Townsend regarded him in silence. Mooney's eyes met the grim intentness of the gaze for a moment, then faltered and fell. The Townsend lip twitched.

"You're goin' to make a speech here in Harniss sometime this week, aren't you?" the captain asked.

"Yes. Next week, Tuesday night, at the town hall."

"Um-hum. Going to say anything about that cranberry bill?"

"Yes, yes, I am. I am going to come out for it hard. I am going to tell everybody that I was wrong about it, that I've seen my mistake and they can count on me as being strong for it. That's what I am going to tell them. . . . Say," he added, eagerly, "I've got my speech all written out. It's in my pocket now. Don't you want to read it, Cap'n? I brought it hoping you would."

Townsend shook his head.

"I can wait until Tuesday, I guess," he replied. "I was planning to go to the rally. I'll be there, along with some more of the dishonest influences. They will all want to hear you."

"And you won't work against me, Cap'n Townsend? I can't tell you how sorry I am about—about this whole business."

"Never mind. You can tell it all at the rally. It ought to be interesting to hear and, if it is interesting enough, it may

bring some votes into port that have been hanging in the wind. I can't say for sure, but it may. . . . There! I can't spare any more time just now. . . . Nabby!" raising his voice. "Nabby!"

Mrs. Gifford appeared between the curtains. Her employer waved a hand toward his visitor.

"Nabby," he said, "just see that Mr. Mooney finds his way out to his buggy, will you. . . . Good night, Mooney."

The honorable representative of an ungrateful constituency, thus unceremoniously dismissed, followed Mrs. Gifford to the dining room and from there to the side entrance to the mansion. Foster Townsend watched him go. Then he shrugged, sniffed disgustedly, and, pulling the soft hat down upon his forehead, strode through the hall, stopped to take an umbrella from the rack, and stepped out through the front door into the rainy blackness of the night.

The few who met and recognized him as he tramped the muddy sidewalks bowed reverentially and then stopped to stare. For Captain Foster Townsend, greatest among Ostable County's great men, to be walking on an evening such as this—walking, instead of riding in state behind his span of blacks—was an unheard-of departure from the ordinary. Why was he doing it? Where was he bound? What important happenings hung upon his footsteps?

They could not guess, nor could their wives or sons and daughters when the story was told them. They were right, however, when they surmised that the magnate's errand must be freighted with importance. It was—vastly important to him and no less so to the members of another household in the village of Harniss.

CHAPTER II

IN the Harniss post office Reliance Clark was sorting the evening mail. The post office was a small building on the Main Road. It sat back fifteen or twenty feet from that road and a white picket fence separated the Clark property from the strip of sidewalk before it. A boardwalk, some of its boards in the last stages of bearability, led from the gap in that fence to the door. Over the door a sign, black letters on a white ground, displayed the words "POST OFFICE." On the inner side of that door was a room of perhaps fifteen by ten feet, lighted in the daytime by two windows and at night by three kerosene lamps in brackets. There was a settee at either end of the room, a stove in the middle, and a wooden box filled with beach sand beside the stove. The plastered walls were covered with handbills and printed placards. The advertisement of the most recent entertainment at the town hall, that furnished by "Professor Megenti, the World Famous Ventriloquist and Necromancer," was prominently displayed, partially obscuring the broadside of "The Spalding Bell Ringers" who had visited Harniss two weeks earlier. Beneath these were other announcements still more passé, dating back even as far as the red, white and blue placards of the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in '76. The room was crowded with men and boys, dressed as befitted the weather, and the atmosphere was thick with tobacco smoke and the smells of wet clothing, fishy oilskins and damp humanity.

Across the side of the room opposite the door was a wooden partition, divided by another door into two sections. On the left was a glass showcase displaying boxes of stick candy, spools of thread, papers of pins and needles, and various oddments of the sort known as "Notions." Behind the showcase was stand-

ing room for the person who waited upon purchasers of these; behind this a blank wall.

At the right of the door, and extending from floor to ceiling, was a wooden frame of letter boxes with a sliding, ground-glass window in the center. This window was closed while the mail was in process of sorting and opened when it was ready for distribution. In the apartment on the inner side of the letter boxes and window, an apartment little bigger than a good-sized closet, Reliance Clark, postmistress of the village of Harniss, was busy, and Millard Fillmore Clark, her half-brother, was making his usual pretense of being so.

Reliance was plump, quick-moving, sharp-eyed. Her hair had scarcely a trace of gray, although she was nearly fifty. The emptied leather mail bag was on the floor by her feet, packages of first and second class mail matter lay upon the pine counter before her and her fingers flew as she shot each letter or postal into the box rented by the person whose name she read.

Millard Fillmore Clark was older by five years. He was short, thin and inclined to be round-shouldered. He was supposed to be sorting also, but his fingers did not fly. They lingered over each envelope or post card they touched. Certain of the envelopes he held, after a precautionary glance at his half-sister, between his eyes and the hanging lamp, and the postal cards he invariably read.

"Humph! Sho!" he muttered aloud, after one such reading. Reliance heard him and turned.

"What is it?" she asked. "What's the matter now?"

Millard, who had spoken without being aware of it, looked guilty.

"Why, nothin' special," he answered, hurriedly. "I just—Humph! Seems that Peter Eldridge's wife's nephew has had another baby. That's news, ain't it!"

Reliance sniffed.

"Yes, I should say it was," she observed, dryly, "if it was the way you put it. His wife's niece, you mean, I suppose."

"Well, it's his wife's nephew's wife. That's the same thing, ain't it. He's the one that married the girl from up to Middleboro. Simpson—or Simpkins—seems to me her name was, as I recollect. She—"

"Mil Clark, you put that postal in the box where it belongs. This mail is late enough already and I don't want to stay out here in this office all night. If you would only mind your own business as well as you do everybody else's you'd be the smartest man in this town, which—"

She did not finish the sentence. Mr. Clark regarded her suspiciously.

"Well, which what?" he demanded, after a momentary pause. "Which what? What was you goin' to say?"

"Nothin' in particular. Go to work and stop talkin'."

"I know what you was goin' to say. You've said it too many times afore. I'm gettin' sick of havin' it hove up to me, too. Just about sick of it, I am. A man can stand about so much and then he gets desperate. He don't care what he does to himself. Some of these days you'll be surprised, Reliance Clark—you and Esther and all the rest of 'em."

His sister did not seem greatly alarmed.

"Um-hum," she sniffed. "Well, just now you can surprise me by doin' your share of this mail sortin'. . . . Oh, my soul and body!" she added, snatching the postal from his hand. "Either go to work or get out of my way, one or the other. Go out in the back room and sit down. You can *sit down* as well as anybody I ever saw."

Millard Fillmore did not accept the suggestion. With the expression of a martyr he proceeded to cut the twine binding the bundles of papers and second class matter, muttering to himself and shaking his head as he did so. The contents of the bundles followed the letters and postals into the boxes. At last Reliance heaved a sigh of relief.

"There!" she exclaimed. "That's done. Open the window."

Mr. Clark slid back the ground-glass window. An eager crowd was standing at the other side of the partition. Millard

faced his fellow-citizens with an air of importance. This was the part of the post-office routine which he liked.

"All right!" he announced, briskly. "Now then! Cap'n Snow's first. Yes, sir! here you are. Quite a bunch of mail you've got this evenin'. All right, Hamilton, you're next. . . . just a minute, Mr. Doane; I'll attend to you in a jiffy. . . . Now, now, you boy! you hold on; you take your turn. No use shovin', you won't get it any sooner. This business has to be done systematic."

The group before the window thinned as its members received their shares of the mail matter. Some departed immediately, others lingered to open envelopes or for a final chat. Suddenly there was a stir and a turning of heads toward the door. Some one had entered, some one of importance. There was a buzz of respectful greeting.

"Why, good evening, Cap'n Townsend!" . . . "How d'ye do, Cap'n?" . . . "Kind of bad night to be out in, ain't it? Yes, 'tis."

The salutations in general were of this kind. There were a few, and these from persons of consequence, which were more familiar. Judge Wixon said "Good evening, Foster," and paused to shake hands, but even he was not in the least flippant. The Reverend Mr. Colton, minister of the old First Church, was most cordial, even anxiously so. "I stopped at your door, Captain Townsend," he began, "but Mrs. Gifford told me—I gathered from what she said—"

The great man broke in. "Yes, all right, Colton," he said. "I'll see you pretty soon. I haven't made up my mind yet. To-morrow or next day, maybe. Hello, Ben! Evening, Paine."

He moved forward to the window, those before him making way for his passing. Millard Fillmore Clark's bow was a picture, his urbanity a marvel. He brushed aside a lad who was clamoring for the copy of the Cape Cod *Item* in the family box and addressed the distinguished patron of the postal service.

"Good evenin', Cap'n Townsend," he gushed, "Yes, *sir!* I've got your mail all ready for you. It's such a mean night I didn't hardly expect you'd come for it yourself, but I had it all laid out cal'latin' if Varunas showed up, I'd—Eh? Oh, yes, here 'tis! There's consider'ble of it, same as there generally is. Yes, indeed!"

Foster Townsend paid no attention to the flow of language. He took the packet of letters and papers and thrust it into the pocket of his ulster, and, pushing the speaker unceremoniously out of the way, leaned through the window and addressed the postmistress.

"Reliance," he said.

Miss Clark, already tidying up the little room preparatory to closing for the night, looked over her shoulder.

"Yes," she said. "What is it?"

"Come here a minute. I want to speak to you."

Reliance finished brushing the counter before she complied. Then, pushing her half-brother a little farther from the window, she stepped to the place he had occupied. Millard accepted the push with as much dignity as was possible under the circumstances. It was no novelty; he was pushed out of some one's way at least a dozen times a day.

"Well?" queried Reliance, briskly. Her tone in addressing Ostable County's first citizen was precisely that which she used when addressing others less consequential. Of the two, it was Foster Townsend who seemed embarrassed, and embarrassment was not usual with him.

"Is—is that niece of yours in the house?" he asked.

For just an instant Reliance hesitated. She was regarding him intently.

"I suppose likely she is," she said. "Why?"

"Hasn't gone to bed, has she?"

"She usually sits up till I come in."

"Um. . . . How much longer will you be out here in the office?"

"I expect to lock up at nine, same as I usually do."

"I see. Going into the house then, aren't you?"

"I certainly am. I don't expect to go out walkin' in a pourin' down rainstorm like this one."

Townsend's embarrassment seemed to increase. He pulled at his beard.

"Well," he said, "I—I want to have a talk with the girl and—er——"

Again he paused. Reliance, her gaze fixed upon his face, broke in.

"What's that?" she asked, sharply. "Do you mean to say you want to talk with *her*—with Esther?"

"Yes, I do. I've got something to say to her, something rather important. I want you to be there when I say it. I'll wait and go into the house with you when you're ready. That is, if it's all right."

Another momentary pause. Then Miss Clark nodded.

"No reason why it shouldn't be all right," she said. "You better come into the shop and wait. . . . Be still, Millard! Here, you let Cap'n Townsend through into the shop and light the lamp there. Yes, and when you've done it you come straight back and help me sweep up. Bring the broom with you. Hurry now!"

Mr. Clark, whose eager ears had been strained to catch this conversation, hastened to unlock the door between the post-office waiting-room and the official quarters. He ushered the visitor into the large apartment at the rear of the building—or would have done so if the said visitor had not pushed him aside and gone in first. About this room were stands displaying finished hats and bonnets. Others, but partially finished, lay about upon tables and chairs. In the room also were two sewing-machines, workbaskets, scraps of ribbons and cloth, spools of thread, and the general disorder of the workroom of a millinery shop. Reliance Clark was the town milliner as well as its postmistress. "I and Esther and Mil have to live on somethin'," Reliance had more than once told Abbie Make-peace, the middle-aged spinster who was her partner in the

millinery business, "and what Uncle Sam pays me for sortin' letters is nothin', or next door to it."

Millard Fillmore, agog with excitement, pulled forward a chair, carefully wiping its seat with a soiled handkerchief, and Foster Townsend sat down. Mr. Clark cleared his throat and offered apologies.

"We don't usually look so—so sort of messed up out here, Cap'n Foster," he explained; "but the mail's been so extry heavy lately—election day comin' and all—that we ain't neither of us had hardly a minute to spare. . . . It ain't any of my business, Cap'n," he added, lowering his voice, "but did I understand you to say you'd come here to-night to see—to see—Esther? I wasn't quite sure as I heard it straight, but—"

From the adjoining room his sister's voice issued an order.

"Bring that broom," she commanded.

Mr. Clark hesitated.

"I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me, Cap'n Foster," he explained. "You see, there's a little too much work for Reliance to handle, and she—yes, yes, I'm comin', Reliance. Heavens and earth! can't you wait a *minute?*"

He took the broom from the corner and joined his sister. Foster Townsend, left alone, crossed his knees and leaned back in the chair.

At eight fifty-nine Miss Clark extinguished the bracket lamps in the waiting-room and locked the front door. A half minute later she appeared in the workshop, threw a black cloth waterproof over her shoulders and turned to her caller.

"All ready," she announced. "Millard, put out that light."

The trio emerged from the side entrance of the building just as the clock presented to the First Church by the late Arabella Townsend struck the hour. It was still raining heavily. They followed a path across a small yard and stood beneath a latticed portico covered with honeysuckle, the dry tendrils of the latter rattling as the rain fell upon them. Reliance opened the door beneath the lattice and they stepped into a tiny sitting-room. By a table, with a paper-shaded lamp upon

it, a girl of seventeen was sitting, reading a public library book. She turned as Miss Clark and her brother entered, but when the bulky figure of Foster Townsend came through the doorway she rose, an expression of astonishment upon her pretty face. She was Esther Townsend, daughter of Freeling Townsend, Foster Townsend's much younger brother, and Eunice, his wife. Freeling Townsend died in eighteen sixty-nine. Eunice, Millard Clark's own sister and half-sister to Reliance, died five years later. Esther had lived with the Clarks ever since. And during that time not once, until this evening, had her father's brother come to that house. She stood and gazed, but she did not speak.

Characteristically it was Millard Fillmore who broke the silence and, just as characteristically, it was Reliance who interrupted him.

"Esther," began Mr. Clark, with bustling importance, "don't you see you've got a caller? Can't you say good evenin'? Take off your things, Cap'n Foster. Here! let me help you with your coat. Esther, can't you see he's holdin' his umbrella? Don't stand there gawpin'. Get—"

And here Reliance broke in. "Millard," she ordered, "be still! Yes, you'd better take off your coat, Foster; that is, if you're goin' to stay any time. It's warm in here. Esther usually has this house hot enough to roast a Sunday dinner. Esther, get him a chair."

The girl brought forward the rocker she had been sitting in. Townsend pulled off his ulster and handed it and his hat and umbrella to Mr. Clark who was obsequiously waiting to receive them. He lowered himself into the rocker. Then he turned to the others.

"You better sit down, all of you," he said. "What I've got to say may take a little time. Sit down, Reliance. Sit down, Esther."

Mr. Clark's name was not included in the invitation, but he was the first to sit. Esther took a chair at the other side of the table. Reliance was shaking out her waterproof.

"Sit down, Reliance," repeated Townsend. Miss Clark's reply was promptly given.

"I intend to, soon as I'm ready," she declared, with some tartness.

The caller looked up at her. "Reliance," he observed, with a grim smile, "you don't change much. When you were a girl I remember you used to say 'Black' whenever anybody else said 'White.' Well, independence is a good thing, if you can afford it."

Reliance, having arranged the waterproof to her satisfaction, hung it on a hook by the door. She drew forward a chair from the wall.

"I've managed to scratch along on it so far," she announced, placing herself in the chair. "Well, what is it you've come to this house for, after all these years, Foster Townsend?"

Townsend was looking at his niece, not at her. And it was the niece whom he addressed.

"Esther," he said, after a moment, "how long has it been since your father died?"

The girl met his keen gaze for an instant, then looked down at the book upon the table.

"Ten years," she said. Her tone was not too cordial. This rich uncle of hers had been a sort of bugbear in her family. Her father never mentioned his name while he lived and, although her mother had mentioned it often enough, it was only to call its owner a selfish, proud, wicked, stubborn man. When their daughter and Foster Townsend met on the street he sometimes acknowledged the meeting with a nod and sometimes not. His wife had been quite different; she always sent the girl presents at Christmas and was kindly gracious. Esther would have liked her, or would have liked to like her. And she envied her, of course; every female in Harniss did that. She envied Foster Townsend, too, but she was far from liking him.

He repeated her words. "Ten years, eh?" he observed, meditatively. "Humph! is it possible! It doesn't seem so

long—yet, of course it is. And the last time I was in this house was at his funeral. No wonder you're surprised to see me here now. I'm surprised, myself, to be here. . . . You're surprised, too, aren't you, Reliance?"

Millard hastened to declare that he was, but was awful glad, of course. His sister's reply was a surprise in itself.

"I don't know that I am, altogether," she said. "I've been rather expectin' you, if you want to know."

Townsend swung about in the rocker. "You have!" he exclaimed, sharply. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean what I say. I don't *know* what you've come for, but I might guess, maybe. Most of us have got a conscience somewheres on the premises, even if some of us have kept it packed away up attic so long we've pretty nigh forgot it."

The captain regarded her with what appeared to be sincere, if somewhat grudging, admiration. "You're a smart woman, Reliance Clark," he declared. "Yes, you are! If Freeling had had sense enough to pick you out instead of— Well, well! there's no use wasting breath about that. . . . You say you've guessed what I've come here for. If you have perhaps Esther hasn't. I'm going to make her a proposition. I don't expect her to answer it, one way or the other, to-night. I want to make it; then I want her and you, Reliance, to think it over and talk it over between you. When you've done that you can say yes or no. Esther," turning to the girl once more, "how would you like to come up to my house and live with me?"

The question, thus bluntly put, had a varied effect upon his listeners. Millard Clark's eyes and mouth opened and he gasped audibly. His half-sister nodded two or three times, as if with satisfaction at finding her suspicions confirmed. Esther gazed at the speaker in mute bewilderment. Townsend looked from one to the other and smiled.

"So you had guessed right, had you, Reliance," he observed. "Well, whether you had or not, there it is. I am lonesome in that big house of mine, lonesome as the devil. I don't suppose I'm what you'd call a sentimental man; I try to use my com-

mon sense and face what can't be helped in a sensible way, but since Mother died I'm lonesome. For the last week I've been making up my mind what to do. I might travel, I suppose, but when I went to sea I cruised a whole lot and there wouldn't be much that was new to look at and no satisfaction in looking at it alone. And I'd rather stay at home, anyhow. This is my town. I helped to make it grow and I'm more interested in it, and the folks in and around it, than I am in anything else. I might move out of my house to a smaller one, but I won't. Mother and I built that house together. She thought the world of it and so do I. She lived in it till she died and that's what I want to do. But I'd rather not live in it by myself. I want somebody to talk to and to talk to me, and I'd rather have a Townsend than anybody else. So I thought of Esther. If she wants to, she can move up there and call it home. I'll look out for her and be as decent as I can to her. She can have all the things she wants—things she can't have now—and all the money she wants—all I think it good for her to have, anyhow. What I'm trying to say is," he added, with deliberate emphasis, "that, if you, Esther, come to live with me you'll be the same as my daughter. And when I'm dead you'll have what I have. . . . That's the proposition—or part of it."

The last sentence of his long speech was delivered with the snap of finality. The speaker leaned back in the rocker, extended his legs in order to more easily get at his trousers pockets, thrust his hands into those pockets, and looked at his niece, then at Reliance and then back at Esther. He did not look at Mr. Clark; the latter might have been one of the pair of crockery lambs on the mantel as far as receiving attention was concerned.

Yet it was Millard who broke the silence.

"Well—I *vow!*" he exclaimed, fervently.

His sister put him back in place just as she might have replaced one of the lambs. "Hush, Millard!" she ordered. "Wait, Esther! . . . So that's only part of your proposition,

is it?" she asked, addressing Townsend. "And what's the other part?"

The great man jingled the change in his pocket. "It's just this," he replied. "I realize, of course, that Esther has been here with you, Reliance, so long that you're about the same as a mother to her. She would miss you—at first, anyhow—and, for the matter of that, I suppose she ought to have a woman to talk to. I never had a girl of my own to bring up, or a boy either, so far as that goes—I wish to God I had—and there are some things a woman can advise her about better than a man. If I didn't know you had sense, Reliance—as well as the stubbornness of a balky horse—I shouldn't think of saying what I am going to say. I want you to shut up this house here. It is mine and I can sell it, I guess; or rent it, anyhow. And if I can't do either I can afford to let it stand empty. Shut it up and come along with Esther to my place. There's room enough there, too much room. I'll make a home for you and pay your bills. Yes, and I'll guarantee you'll be more comfortable there, and have less care, than you ever had in your life. That's the other half of my offer. Think it over."

During this blunt statement of an astonishing proposal the face of Millard Fillmore Clark might have been worth looking at, had any one dreamed of doing such a thing. At first it had expressed eagerness and overwhelming curiosity. Then, when Foster Townsend extended the invitation—or delivered the command, for it was quite as much an order as a request—to his half-sister, the curiosity was superseded by joyful excitement. And now, when the speech from the rocking-chair throne had ended without mention of his own name, or even acknowledgment of his connection with the household, all symptoms of the aforementioned emotions were superseded by those of anxiety and alarmed indignation.

"Here! hold on!" he protested, springing to his feet. "What's that you're sayin', Cap'n Foster? You're cal'latin' to take Reliance and—and Esther to—to live along with you and—and—" Reliance lifted a hand. "Ssh!" she said.

"No, I won't ssh neither! He—he says he wants to—to take you and her away and shut up this house and—and—What about *me?*" his voice rising to a falsetto. "Where am *I* goin'? Eh! Who's goin' to—"

Townsend, even then, did not take the trouble to turn and look at him, but he did speak over his shoulder. "All right, all right," he broke in, with careless contempt. "You can come, too. There'll be a room for you and Varunas can find something for you to do around the stables, I guess. You'll be looked after, don't worry. Have to take the tail with the hide, I realize that," he added, philosophically. ". . . Well, Esther," turning to his niece, "how does it sound to you, now you've heard the whole of it?"

The girl, thus addressed, looked at him in faltering hesitancy. She turned to her aunt as if seeking the latter's help in a situation too hopelessly impossible to be met without it.

"Well?" repeated her uncle.

Esther looked at Reliance, but the latter was looking at the captain, not at her. The girl turned back, to meet the searching scrutiny of the eyes beneath the heavy brows. The look in those eyes was not unkindly, in fact, it was the opposite, but she was frightened. This was the man who had quarreled with her father, whose prideful arrogant self-will was responsible, so Eunice Townsend had always declared, for the poverty and privation of their lives since his death. This was the man she had been taught to hate. And now he was bidding her come to live with him! She couldn't do such a thing—of course she couldn't—and yet, if her aunt came also, she—even then she was beginning to realize a little of the marvelous possibilities of that invitation.

The look in her uncle's eyes was still kindly, but insistent. He had asked a question and he was expecting an answer. She must say something. She caught her breath, almost with a sob.

"Oh, oh, I don't know!" she cried, desperately. "I don't know! It doesn't seem as if—but—oh, please don't ask me—not now! I don't know what to say."

Townsend nodded. "Of course you don't," he agreed. "I didn't expect you to say yes or no now, to-night. I was wondering how the idea sounded to you, that's all. You and Reliance think it over and talk it over together and when you've made up your mind let me know. To-morrow—yes, or the next day—will be time enough. There's no particular hurry."

He rose from the rocker and took his hat and coat from the side table where Millard had reverently laid them. Mr. Clark sprang to help with the ulster, but he and his proffered assistance were ignored, as usual.

"There's just one thing more that maybe I ought to say," the captain added, turning to Reliance, who had risen when he did. "And that is this: She," with a jerk of the head in Esther's direction, "doesn't understand yet all this proposition is liable to mean. If she comes to be with me, and we get along all right and I like her, she'll be what I said before, just the same as my daughter. If she wants to go away to boarding-school she can go, I guess; I'll decide that later on. She's got a good voice, they tell me. Everybody says she sings pretty well and that she could sing better if she was learned how by somebody that knew. Well, I'll see that she *is* learned. I've got a good piano up at the house. At least I suppose it's good; it was the best I could buy and I paid enough for it. Mother used to pick at it a little, but she always said it was a pity it wasn't used more. Esther can use it all she wants to. I don't know anything about music. I never had much use for a man who fooled with pianos and fiddles; fact is, I never considered that kind of fellow a man at all. But I haven't any objections to a woman's fooling with 'em. There's the piano and there's the music teacher, or there can be one as well as not. Think of that, too, while you are thinking. . . . I guess that's all. Good night."

He picked up his umbrella and strode to the door. Reliance spoke once more.

"Just a minute," she said. "Maybe it isn't quite all. I can

see what you mean to do for Esther and perhaps I can see a little of what Millard will have to do. But where do I come in? What will *I* do up in that twenty-odd room house of yours, Foster Townsend? You don't expect *me* to play your piano, do you?"

He laughed, laughed aloud, something which he seldom did.

"No," he said, "I don't expect that, Reliance. I don't care what you do. You can do nothing, if you want to. Or you can be my housekeeper, if that suits you better. Mother kept house the way it ought to be kept and she has told me more than once that you were about the only other woman she ever ran across who was as particular as she was. You can boss Nabby and whatever hired help we have, and run things to please yourself—provided they please me, too. That is fair, isn't it?"

Miss Clark nodded grimly. "Maybe so," she observed. "We won't argue about it to-night. There's one other thing, though, that I guess you've forgot. I'm postmistress here in Harniss. I run a milliner shop, too, but that is my own, or two-thirds of it is, and I can do what I like with it. But the post office is different. Do you expect me to walk out of that office and leave a note for Uncle Sam sayin' 'You and the mail can go to Jericho. I've gone to Foster Townsend's!' Do you expect me to do that?"

Townsend laughed again. He seemed in far better spirits than when he entered that sitting-room.

"Not exactly—no," he replied. "As for the post office,—well, who had you made postmistress in the first place?"

Miss Clark stared at him. "Who had me made postmistress?" she repeated. "Why, the U.S. government appointed me, if that's what you mean. And that was nine years ago. What do you ask such a question as that for?"

"I'll ask you another one. When Sylvanus Oaks died you sent in a petition asking for his job, didn't you? . . . Oh, never mind! I know you did, and so did Frank Parker and Reuben Hatch and a couple more. Why do you suppose the government people picked you out instead of one of the others?

Their petitions were as long as yours. Well, I'll tell you. It was because I told them to."

She was surprised now, there was no doubt of that. "You told 'em!" she repeated, sharply. "*You* did! Why, you didn't even sign my petition. Not that I asked you to sign it. I didn't."

"No. I wondered if you were going to, but you were your own pig-headed self and didn't bring it near me. But I didn't sign any one else's either; you know that."

"I don't know it. I never cared enough to find out."

"No?" with a chuckle. "Well, you know it now. What you haven't known all this time is that I wrote to a friend of mine who was in Congress from this district and told him you were the fittest candidate for the place and to see that you got it. He saw just that. I put you into that post office, Reliance, just as I've rented you this house of mine, and if I take you out of both I can't see that anybody has any ground for complaint. I'll hear from you in a day or two, of course. Good night. Good night, Esther."

He did not include Mr. Clark in his good night, but the latter ran out after him in the rain and caught his arm.

"It'll be all right, Cap'n Foster," whispered Millard, eagerly. "Don't you fret a mite. It'll come out all right. Reliance she always has to argue and fetch up objections to 'most anything, but she'll come round. We'll be up there along with you inside of a week, all hands of us. You leave it to me. I'll 'tend to it."

Foster Townsend made no reply. He shook off the clutch upon his coat sleeve and walked away into the rain-striped blackness beyond the light from the open door. Millard Fillmore hurried back to the sitting room.

"Gosh!" he whooped ecstatically, "Oh, my *gosh!* Say, ain't it *wonderful!* Ain't it—"

He stopped, for his half-sister was speaking to their niece and he caught a word or two—unbelievable, horrifying words which caused his pæan of triumphant rejoicing to break off in the middle of the first strophe.

"I should say not!" declared Reliance. "Well, I should say *not!* Humph! the idea! I could have slapped his face for him for darin' to think such a thing, let alone sayin' it out loud—to me. When I get so worn out and good for nothin' that I can't earn my own livin' I'll find the cheapest way to die and do it, and I'll take care to have enough put by to pay for my buryin'. I won't go up to his palace and live on the leavin's from *his* table. *I'm* no Lazarus. Saucy patronizin' thing! The idea!"

Esther might have spoken, but Mr. Clark cut in ahead of her.

"What!" he shouted, in a frenzy. "What's that you're tellin' her, Reliance Clark? Do you mean to say you ain't goin' to take up with a chance like *that?* My gosh, woman, you're crazy!"

She whirled on him. "You keep still!" she commanded. "This isn't any of your business at all. Don't you say another word."

"But it *is* my business. Why ain't it my business? Didn't he ask me same as he did the rest of you? Didn't—"

She did not let him finish. "No, he did not," she declared, with fierce contempt. "He said he supposed he would have to take the tail with the hide, that's what he said, and if you like bein' called a tail, I don't."

"Aw, come now, Reliance! He never meant—he asked me—"

"He didn't ask you; he took you same as he might take a—the scales on a codfish, because he knew he couldn't catch the critter without 'em. It is Esther he's after and he was shrewd enough to think that maybe she might not go unless I did. Yes, and that I couldn't leave a helpless thing like you to float around creation with nobody to steer you. Oh, *don't* make me any madder than I am, Mil Clark!"

"Aw, Reliance, have some sense! Why—"

"Be still, Mil Clark! . . . Oh, when he had the impudence to tell me that he got me that post-office appointment, I—I—Oh, that was the last straw!"

She was sputtering sparks like a pinwheel. Esther tried to soothe her.

"There, there, Auntie," she protested, "you mustn't get into such a state. I don't care at all, really. I'm glad. I don't want to live with him. Of course I don't. I want to stay with you, right here in this house, just as I always have. Don't worry about it any more—please."

The thunder cloud upon her aunt's brow was thinning. Her comely face was still crimson, but the fire in her eyes was beginning to die. She walked over to the window, stood there for a moment, and, when she turned, there was a suspicion of a smile at the corners of her lips.

"My!" she exclaimed, with a sigh. "I don't wonder Millard called me crazy. I haven't been so upset for I don't know when. It was findin' out that he was responsible for my bein' made postmistress that got me so. The rest of it I kind of expected—that is, I rather guessed he had come to ask for Esther. Yes, I did. Nabby Gifford told me how lonesome he was nowadays and before Arabella Townsend died—a fortni't or two before she was taken sick—she came to see me about a hat I was makin' for her, and somethin' she said then set me thinkin'. She was pretty confidential—she was like that sometimes with me—and she told me that the greatest trial of hers and Foster's lives was that the only child they had died when it was a baby and that they didn't have any more. She asked a lot about you, Esther, about what sort of a girl you were and about your singin' and all, and—well, it made me wonder. And I knew perfectly well that whatever she wanted her husband would let her have. She was the only person on earth who could get past that stubborn streak of his. . . . Humph! And he called *me* pig-headed! *He* did!"

Her half-brother had kept quiet as long as he could.

"Well, well, well!" he cried. "What if he did! He didn't mean nothin'. You and Esther don't seem to realize what else he said. He's offerin' us a home in the finest house in Ostable County. Horses and teams to ride around in, no bills to pay,

nothin' to worry about, no work—that is, nothin' except—"

"Oh, do stop! I declare I believe you'd just as soon be a 'tail' as anything else. All a tail has to do is brush off flies and that would just suit you."

"Look here! I don't care to have you talk to me that way."

"All right, I'm not talkin' to you. I'm talkin' to somebody else. So I wasn't so surprised when he offered to adopt you, Esther, for adoption is what it amounts to. When he took me aboard too—yes, yes, and you, Millard—I was surprised, but of course I could see why he did it, anybody could. If he hadn't crowed over me about that post-office appointment! I never once supposed *he* got it for me. . . . Oh, I don't doubt he did! He runs everything in this part of the state. But it hurts my pride—and it makes me just as mad now when I think of it."

Again Esther tried to calm her.

"Never mind whether he did or not, Auntie dear," she urged. "You have kept it ever since and everybody says you are the best postmistress the town ever had. And, after all," she added, "if he did get the appointment, he did it to help you, didn't he? It seems to me that was—well, kind of him."

Her aunt turned quickly. "Kind!" she repeated. "Of course it was kind, or he meant it to be. But I like to know about kindnesses when they're done, not have 'em sprung on me as a good joke nine years afterwards. He has been chucklin' to himself over that joke ever since. In a lot of ways," she went on earnestly, "Foster Townsend is a kind man and a good man. The trouble is that he has got so used to bein' told that he is the greatest man in the world that he has come to believe it."

Esther was amazed. "Why, how can you call him good!" she exclaimed. "Mother always said he—"

Reliance interrupted. "I know," she put in hastily. "Well, your mother may have been a little prejudiced, perhaps. She had reason to be."

The girl's lips tightened.

"At any rate," she declared, "his adopting me is ridiculous. I don't want to be adopted and I shan't be. That is settled."

Miss Clark shook her head. "No," she said, firmly. "That part isn't settled—yet. He isn't goin' to adopt me, or Millard either. Millard, do hush! . . . But for you, Esther, it isn't settled at all. There is a whole lot to be said and thought over before that is settled. I'm goin' to bed. Millard, put out the lamp."

Mr. Clarke made one more desperate appeal.

"If I didn't know," he declared, with angry sarcasm, "I'd swear all hands in this house had been drinkin'—all hands but me, I mean. You give out that it's settled and Esther gives out that it's settled, but *I* haven't settled nothin' yet as I know of. Cap'n Foster Townsend asked me to come and live with him. Right here in this room he asked it and you two heard him. All right. Then I guess I'm the one to say yes or no—to my part of it, anyhow."

Reliance looked at him. "Then if I was you I'd say it," she agreed, sweetly. "You go right up to his house to-morrow and tell him that no matter what Esther and I do, you'll move in before sunset. You tell him that and see what he says about it. . . . Come, Esther. Don't you leave that lamp burnin' all night, Millard."

She and Esther left the room, and a few moments later, their foot steps were heard upon the stairs. Millard Fillmore Clark, left alone, threw himself into the rocker and relapsed into the pessimistic meditations of a hurt and insulted spirit. For an hour he sat there, scowling and biting his nails. Then he rose and went out into the dining room, where he opened the door of a dark closet and reached down into a corner behind a tall crockery cooky jar. Hidden in that corner was a black bottle. It contained home-made wild-cherry rum and his half-sister had cached it there, fondly believing that he could never find it. He removed the cork, took a long drink, and then another. Soon afterward he, too, went upstairs and to bed.

CHAPTER III

NABBY GIFFORD did not serve her employer's breakfast next morning. Ellen Dooley, the red-cheeked Irish "second maid," did that. Nabby cooked the breakfast, of course, and she made it a point to pass through the library after the meal was over. Foster Townsend was seated in the leather easy-chair reading the *Item,* a copy of which was included in the mail handed him by Millard Clark at the post office the previous evening. Mrs. Gifford lingered by the hall door and the captain looked up at her over his spectacles.

"Well, Nabby," he inquired, "what is it?"

Nabby affected surprise at the question.

"Why, nothin'," she said. "I was just goin' upstairs a minute and I come this way 'cause 'twas the shortest. That's all."

"Yes, yes, I know. That's all—but what is the rest?"

"Well—I was goin' to tell you that the minister was here last night right after you left."

"I know he was. I met him down town and he told me he called. What else?"

"Nothin' else—except— Well, I was wonderin' if you'd thought over what I said to you last night about—" She finished the sentence with a wink and a jerk of the head in the direction of the dining room, where Ellen was clearing the table. At that moment the second maid departed to the kitchen with a double handful of dishes and Nabby seized the opportunity to come close to the easy-chair.

"She never got home from that Odd Fellers' ball till one o'clock this mornin'," Nabby announced, in an indignant whisper. "Quarter past one 'twas when she come up the back

stairs. Any self-respectin' Christian is sound asleep at that ungodly time of night, and thinks I—"

"Wait a minute. How did you know it was quarter past one?"

"Because I looked at my alarm clock and see 'twas, that's how. And I woke up Varunas and he see it, too."

"Humph! I always thought you were a Christian, Nabby."

"Eh? Well, I am. Anyhow I *hope* I am. Who said I wasn't?"

"You just told me that every self-respecting Christian was asleep at that hour. . . . Oh, never mind! Did Varunas behave like a Christian when you woke him up?"

Mrs. Gifford's face expressed horrified consternation. "My soul!" she exclaimed. "Don't tell me *you* could hear what he said away off in the front of the house, Cap'n Foster!"

"All right, Nabby. You leave Ellen to me. If I decide to take your advice and keep only one girl I'll let you know. If I don't we'll go on as we are. And I may have a surprise for you pretty soon, anyway. Where's Varunas now?"

"Out in the barn, I suppose. He's there from mornin' till night. Yes, and when it's neither mornin' nor night, too. That's another thing, Cap'n Foster. That man of mine has been gettin' up at four o'clock for the last two, three mornin's, and he won't tell me what he's doin' it for, neither. I asked him this very mornin'—five minutes of four by the clock, 'twas—and all he done was look foolish and laugh. 'Early to rise makes you healthy and wealthy and wise,' he says. 'Ain't you never heard that, Nabby?' I told him, says I, 'Humph!' I says, 'maybe I have heard it, but I never heard anybody call you wealthy; and as for bein' *wise!*'"

Townsend lifted a hand. He rose from the chair.

"All right, Nabby," he broke in. "I shouldn't wonder if Varunas was wise for once in his life. At least I'm hoping he is wiser just now than some other folks who think they are."

The great barn, towered and cupolaed in corresponding magnificence with the house, was situated at the rear of the

yard, the vegetable garden at one side and the flower beds, beloved by the late Arabella Townsend, upon the other. Behind the barn were hen yards, pigsties, and, beyond these, the rolling acres of Townsend pastures, meadows and pine groves.

In the white painted stables beyond the carriage house the captain found Mr. Gifford seated upon an overturned bucket. Upon his shriveled little face was an expression of huge satisfaction. His puckered lips widened in a grin as Townsend came in.

"Been waitin' for you, Cap'n Foster," he announced. "Ain't touched a thing. Left the whitewashin' job just as 'twas for you to see. You stay right where you be and I'll fetch him out."

He moved down the row of stalls, where polished flanks and carefully brushed tails indicated the care bestowed upon each occupant, and from one led out a horse with a white forehead and a ring of white encircling one of its legs.

"There!" crowed Varunas. "There we be! . . . No, no! Don't come no closer, Cap'n Foster. Just stand where you are and get a gen'ral view. Looks enough like Claribel to fool a nigh-sighted person on a dark mornin', don't he? He, he!"

Townsend smiled. "Good work, Varunas!" he grunted. "Well? How did it go?"

Mr. Gifford winked. "*He* went fine," he declared. "Done that Circle in jig time, he did, and I was hangin' back on him at that. I give you my word I never realized Hornet had it in him. Why, when I see—"

"Never mind. It is what Seth Emmons saw that interests me just now. Was Seth on hand at the Circle this morning?"

Varunas winked again. "I have a suspicion he was," he chuckled. "'Twas dark and kind of foggy after the rain, and a body that wan't up to snuff, or hadn't been tipped off same as I was, would have swore there wan't another soul within a half mile. But—well, you know that old fish shanty over at the fur side of the Circle, on the rise next the beach? Um-hum. Well, when Hornet and me went past that shanty the first time

round it looked to me as if the door was open just a crack. When we went round the second time the crack was wider. It *might* have been the wind that blowed it open—only there wan't any wind. He, he, he!"

He slapped his knee in gleeful triumph. Townsend's smile became a grin.

"All right, Varunas," he said. "How was the betting the last time you heard?"

"There ain't much—or there wasn't yesterday. There might be a little more to-day. Some of them Bayporters might drift over and begin to loosen up; 'specially if Sam and Seth spread the news that Claribel couldn't do no better'n he done this mornin'."

"If they do you might let me know."

"You bet you I will! I'll let myself know, too, about seven or eight dollars' worth. . . . Say, Cap'n, don't for mercy sakes tell Nabby I said that. She's death on bettin' anyhow; and—" with aggrieved indignation, "if I won she'd make me hand her over the heft of the money. The only way for me to keep my winnin's is to spend 'em quick. I've learned that much."

Foster Townsend left the house soon afterward and strolled, as was his morning custom, about the place, his hands in the pockets of his coat, the soft hat at the back of his head, and his after-breakfast cigar between his teeth. He lingered by the poultry yards, looked at the hogs in their pens, made mental notes of a section of fence which needed repair, decided that the strip of lawn on the left-hand side of the drive should be plowed and reseeded in the spring. His tour of inspection was leisurely, for he enjoyed it. He loved every inch of his domain. It was his. He had earned it. It represented success, the prize at the top of the ladder which he had climbed unaided. He had been a poor boy; now he was a rich man. In his youth the aristocrats of his native town scarcely deigned to notice him; now he was the aristocrat and his was the voice of authority. He had fought his way up from cabin boy to captain of a ship, from captain to owner, from that, through

keen trading and daring speculation, to the day when he could afford to retire from active business. The break with his partner, Elisha Cook, and the lawsuit which followed the break, had threatened disaster time after time, but during the years of expensive and worrisome litigation he had never lost his nerve. If Cook won and was awarded even the greater part of the sum for which he was suing, it meant ruin to Townsend, but the risk but made the battle more enjoyable. And Cook had not won. True, the latter and his lawyers had not openly conceded the Townsend victory, but their talk of further fighting was but talk. Foster Townsend's luck had held, as it had held before, and "luck"—as he saw it—was but the wage of foresight, good judgment, and the courage to back one's convictions to the limit of safety—yes, and sometimes beyond that limit. He considered himself entitled to the rewards which were his and he enjoyed their possession, the money and the power—particularly the power.

His walk that morning was as satisfactory as usual for a time. It was only when he reached the lattice frame enclosing the flower garden that his complacency departed. The sight of the neat beds and the dead stalks in those beds brought with it a staggering shock. His wife had set out many of those plants with her own hands. She had superintended the setting out of all. Those flowers and that garden were her joy. From early summer until fall she had filled the rooms with blossoms. She would never do it again. She had left that garden and the mansion and him forever and all his money and authority were useless in the face of that irrevocable fact. His loneliness came over him once more, as it had come so often during the week since her funeral. He felt a savage resentment. He was accustomed to having his own way, to forcing his will against all obstacles. Now he—Foster Townsend—was as helpless against this stroke of Fate as the weakest-willed creature in the world.

He returned to the house, the easy-chair, and the paper in the library. He glanced at the clock. The time was nearly

eleven. At the close of the interview in the Clark cottage the previous evening he had casually told Esther and Reliance that they might take their time in reaching a decision concerning his proposal. He had told them this, but he had meant it merely as a gracious gesture. He considered the matter settled and had expected an early call and the grateful announcement of acceptance. No one had called and no word had been sent him. He could not understand why and, in his present frame of mind, he resented the delay. What was the matter with those people? Was it possible they did not realize what his offer meant to them and their future? They had best realize it; it would not be repeated.

Dinner was a necessary nuisance to be endured and he got through with it as quickly as possible. Alone in the big dining room, waited upon by Ellen, with the chair at the other end of the table unoccupied, it was no wonder that appetite failed him. In the old days—and they were not so old—his dinner was an event. He was particular about the choice of dishes, insisted upon an abundance of everything, lingered over the dessert, smoked his cigar and listened while Mother chatted of the affairs of the household or repeated town gossip. Very often there were guests—leading politicians of the county; his lawyers down from Boston on business connected with the eternal suit; Judge Baxter and Mrs. Baxter from Ostable; other prominent—though of course less prominent—fellow townspeople like the Snows or the Taylors; on Sundays the minister and his wife. Pleasant company, in complete agreement with his opinions on all subjects, substantial people, people of consequence. They would come now if he asked them, but he had no mind to ask. With that vacant chair opposite his own, the filling of the others would be only an emphasis of his wretchedness.

Arabella had liked their niece, had more than once spoken of that liking, had even dared so far on rare occasions as to hint that a girl like Esther might be "kind of nice to have around; somebody outside of just us two old folks to take an interest in. Don't you think so, dear?" He had refused to listen to the

hints then. Freeling Townsend had chosen to follow his own road in open defiance of the brother who had lifted him out of the mire so often. Let those who were responsible for his taking that road tramp it to the end; that was his brusque ultimatum. Only since his wife's death had he changed his mind. That conscience to which Reliance Clark had referred as having been "pushed away up attic" had been shaken from its camphor. Perhaps he had been too hard. He had been right, of course, but even so he might have yielded, to please Mother. It would have pleased her then; if the talk which the minister and the rest so wearisomely offered him as consolation *should* be true it might please her now. He was a regular church-goer at the old First Meeting House on Sunday, but he was so more because it was the conservative, orthodox thing to do than from any deep-rooted religious convictions. Nevertheless—

And Esther was a Townsend. It was risky experiment, but for Mother's sake he had decided to give it a trial. His own loneliness and the growing certainty that he could not continue to live in that house without companionship were the weights which tipped the balance.

Well; it had been tipped. He had gone as far as even Arabella could have wished. Farther, for he had offered a home to Reliance and that worthless half-brother of hers, not because he wanted to, but because he felt certain that Esther would not leave her aunt. He had gone far enough. As the afternoon passed and no answer came he began to think that he had gone too far. Confound their impudence!

By four he was pacing up and down the library in a state of mind divided between anger and alarm. He was tempted to sit down at his desk and write a curt note withdrawing his offer altogether. He did not do so because—well, because, in spite of his resentment and chagrin, he realized that such a withdrawal would leave him exactly where he was now, alone—and doomed to remain alone always. There was no one else, no one except a paid companion, and companionship of that kind would be worse than none. And, too, he had begun al-

ready to make plans for the girl, plans which were alluring as a means of occupying his own mind in their execution and had become more alluring since his meeting with their principal the previous evening. She was a pretty girl, modest and attractive; in spite of prejudice he had been forced to admit that. And she looked like a Townsend; there was scarcely a trace of Clark about her. Put a girl like that in the surroundings such as he could give her, with the opportunities and the money—why, there might be a new interest in life for him, just as Mother had suggested.

But where was she? Why hadn't he heard from her? It was Reliance who was responsible for the delay, he was certain of that. He had known Reliance Clark ever since she was a schoolgirl and he a young sea captain. She was poor then as now, but pretty and popular, and as independent as a "hog on ice," to use a Cape Cod simile. There was a time when she and he were very friendly indeed, but the friendship was a stormy one. Two such natures were bound to clash. She resented the slightest hint of patronizing and was as set in her way as he was in his, which is saying not a little. They had quarreled, made it up, quarreled again and drifted apart. Now he was the Harniss mogul and she was its postmistress, because he had made her so. Even in the midst of his irritation he chuckled as he remembered her astonishment when he told her that she owed her appointment to his influence. He had given her self-satisfaction one jolt, at all events.

It was quite natural that, in all his thinking and surmising, he gave not one thought to Millard Clark. Very few people who knew him did waste thought on Millard.

Nabby Gifford's voice sounded behind the drawn portières.

"Cap'n Foster," said Nabby. "Cap'n Foster, you in there? If you be there's somebody come to see you."

Townsend was standing by the desk. He turned.

"Who is it?" he demanded. "If it is the minister tell him I'm busy."

"'Tain't the minister. It's Reliance Clark."

"What! . . . Humph! How did she get here? I've been watching the front gate."

"She never come in that gate. Come across lots, I cal'late. She's at the side door. I told her I wan't sure that you could talk to her now."

"Who is with her?"

"Eh? Why, nobody's with her. She's all alone. Kind of funny, her comin', ain't it?"

Townsend frowned. Alone? What might that mean?

"Bring her in here," he ordered. "Light that lamp on the table. It's getting dark."

Nabby lighted the student lamp and hurried out. A moment later she ushered Reliance into the library.

"Good afternoon, Foster," said Reliance, pleasantly. Townsend nodded. Then he turned to the housekeeper.

"You needn't wait, Nabby," he said. "You better go out in the kitchen. Yes, and shut the door after you."

Mrs. Gifford's reception of this blunt dismissal was characteristic. She went, but she fired a parting shot.

"The kitchen was where I was bound, so fur as that goes," she observed, with dignity. "And I don't need to be reminded to shut the door, neither. It ain't *me* that leaves doors open in *this* house."

Foster Townsend waited until a vigorous slam proved that his order had been obeyed. Then he turned to his visitor.

"Sit down," he said, motioning toward a chair. "Better take off your things, hadn't you?"

Reliance shook her head.

"I'll sit down a minute," she replied, "but I'll keep my things on. I can't stop very long. I must get back to the shop. I left Abbie workin' on Jane Snow's hat and mercy knows what she'll do with it unless I'm there to watch her. And if that isn't enough to make me uneasy the post office is. Millard is supposed to be attendin' to that; 'supposed' is what I said."

Townsend smiled appreciation of the sarcasm. He lowered himself into the easy-chair.

"Where is the girl?" he asked. "Why didn't you bring her with you?"

"She is at home, getting her things together. At least I suppose she is, that is what I told her she had better do. She'll be here to-morrow—to stay."

Townsend's big body relaxed against the leather cushions. His expression, however, did not change. He took pains that it did not do so. No one—least of all the astute Miss Clark—should guess the relief the blunt announcement gave him.

"Oh!" he said, carelessly. "So you've decided to take up with my offer, have you. You made up your minds pretty promptly, seems to me. I told you to take all the time you wanted."

"Yes, I know you did. And I imagine you thought we wouldn't take much. Well, you were right in one way. *My* mind was made up before I went to bed last night."

"Um-hum. . . . And you are coming to-morrow? That is quick business, but it suits me if it does you. You can't give up the post office as soon as that, though. You'll have to attend to that until I can pick out somebody to take your place. It won't take long. Once let it be known that the job is vacant and there'll be plenty of candidates."

"I don't doubt it, but it isn't goin' to be known. I'm postmistress here at Harniss and I'm goin' to keep the place. That is," she added, tartly, "I am unless you or some of the rest of the smart wire-pullers work your schemes to have me put out."

He regarded her keenly. "Now what do you mean by that?" he demanded. "Look here, Reliance, you ought to understand that if you come to my house to live you come as—well, as part of the family. You are Esther's aunt and when you and she come here I can't have you running back and forth to that post office. I'm figuring to take care of you and pay your bills."

She silenced him with an impatient movement of her hand.

"There, there!" she exclaimed. "Don't talk that way, or I shall lose my temper and say things that might just as well not be said. I haven't yet quite got over your tellin' me how you had me appointed to that office. You won't have to pay my bills—no, nor Millard's either. We aren't comin' to live with you."

He bent forward in the chair. "What's that!" he exclaimed. "Didn't you just tell me you were coming?"

"Of course I didn't. I told you that Esther Townsend was comin'. She is; she will be here to-morrow. But Reliance Clark isn't comin'. No, nor Millard—unless he does somethin' for once on his own hook and even then he'd have to do it over my dead body. The Clarks will stay in the house they rent of you—provided you don't order 'em out—and pay that rent and their own bills same as they always have. . . . Oh, don't pretend to look so surprised!" she added, sharply. "I can't think you ever really expected me to do anything else."

He was surprised, however. For a moment he stared at her, his brows drawn together and his eyes fixed upon her face. He saw no wavering resolution or pretense there.

"Humph!" he grunted, leaning back slowly against the cushions. "So that's it, eh? . . . I see."

"I certainly hope you do see. I should hate to believe you ever really saw anything else. Honestly now, Foster Townsend, you never expected that I would drop my work and my self-respect and everything else of my own and move in here to live on your charity like—like a pauper goin' to the poorhouse? You didn't really expect me to do that? Come now!"

Whatever he expected, or had expected up to that time, he kept to himself. He thrust his hands into his trousers pockets and smiled.

"The same old Reliance, aren't you," he observed. "I told you last night that you hadn't changed, and I was right. You're just as contrary as ever."

"Perhaps I am. I'm glad I've got spunk enough to be contrary when it is necessary. And it is necessary now."

"Humph! Answer me this: Why do you suppose I asked you and your brother to come here if I didn't expect you to come? If I hadn't wanted you I shouldn't have asked you. I usually know what I mean."

"Yes, you do. So do I. That's one thing we've got in common, anyhow. And—"

"Hold on! As for your coming here being like going to the poorhouse—well, I don't know that I'd call this place a poorhouse, exactly. As for work, I told you I could find plenty of work for you to do, if you wanted it."

"Yes, but you told me you'd have to *find* it. You didn't say you needed me, because you know perfectly well you don't. Foster, I used to know you pretty well and you haven't changed any more than I have—except that you've grown rich, and mercy knows I am as poor as I ever was. When you used to come to see me and take me to ride and to parties and all the rest of it—a hundred years ago, or whenever it was—you always set out to have your own way. I must do the things you wanted done and not do the things you didn't want."

He was amused. "Maybe so," he admitted, with a chuckle, "but I remember you generally did what *you* wanted to, in the end. And you've done it ever since, so far as I can make out."

"Well, haven't you?"

"Maybe. I've usually tried to have my own way—yes. But you bet I made certain that it was a good way before I started. I've done fairly well by having it, too, I guess."

"I guess you have. And I have had my way and haven't done much; that is what you're thinkin' and I may as well say it for you."

"Now, now, Reliance, I wasn't thinking any such thing. You're wrong when you say I didn't want you to come here along with Esther. I did."

"Yes, you did in a way. That is, you were lonesome, and that up-attic conscience I reminded you of got to botherin' you. You wanted somebody to keep you company and, after all, Esther was one of your own relations and you knew she was a

nice girl. And Arabella always—" She paused, because of the expression upon his face. "Never mind that," she added, hurriedly, and in a tone less sharp. "I know what Arabella was to you and I have been awfully sorry for you this past week, Foster; I truly have. . . . You wanted Esther and made up your mind to get her here with you; but when you got to thinkin' of that 'good way' you mentioned—the surest way to have your own way about her—you thought of me. You realized a little of how much she and I were to each other and you were afraid you couldn't coax her up to this house unless I came, too. And you couldn't get me unless Millard was thrown into the bag. So you asked us all, hide and tail. That is the truth of it and you know it. What is the use of makin' believe?"

He rubbed his beard and slowly shook his head.

"You are smart, Reliance," he admitted, grudgingly. "Part of what you say is true. It isn't all true, though. It would have been rather fun to have you around. The fights we would be bound to have would have given me something new to think about, and the way I feel just now I need it. And I can't see any reason why you should fly up like a setting hen because I made the offer. There's no charity about it. It is what I wanted and I can afford to have what I want."

"You can't afford to have me. Or, anyhow, I can't afford to come. Oh, for mercy sakes, Foster! do you suppose you are the only soul on earth who has any pride? About everybody who has anything to do with you gets down on their knees and sings Psalms when you take notice of 'em. I don't; I'm not much of a singer. . . . Well, well! we've talked enough about what was settled in the beginnin'. Esther is comin' here to-morrow. We must talk about her in these few minutes I've got to spare."

He nodded. "All right," he agreed. "Talk about her."

"I'm goin' to. Her position isn't a bit like mine; it's just the opposite. I shouldn't think of takin' up with your offer. She shouldn't think—or be let think—of anything else. She is

young, and pretty, and she's got a lot of sense for a girl of her age. With your money and your influence and the chance they will give her she can have a happy life—yes, a pretty wonderful life, and I'd be the last to say she shouldn't have it. I've done my best to make her understand that and she has finally agreed to give you a trial."

She had surprised him again and this time he showed his feeling.

"Humph!" he grunted, frowning. "So she's going to give me a trial, is she? That's kind of her. I had an idea it might be the other way around."

"Yes, you would. Well, it isn't all that way, not by a good deal. If you think that girl is goin' to come here and wait for you to say 'Boo' and then say it back, like an echo off a stone wall, you don't know her, that's all. She's sensitive and high strung and proud and she's got a will of her own; she's a Townsend, too, you mustn't forget that. You've got to handle her the way you handle one of those trottin' horses of yours, with judgment, not with a whip. You've got to be awfully careful, Foster Townsend."

Not since his early days at sea had any one lectured him in this manner. Even his wife, in her few and rare moments of self-assertion, had never spoken her mind as bluntly or with so little regard for his importance. He resented it.

"Here, here!" he commanded, sharply. "We've had about enough of this, seems to me. I'm not begging for the girl. She doesn't have to say yes, unless she wants to. Yes," rising to his feet, "and you better tell her I said so. If she's fool enough not to appreciate what I planned to do for her I don't want her here. Call the whole thing off. I'm satisfied."

Miss Clark did not rise. Instead she remained in her chair.

"Oh, dear!" she said, with a sigh of resignation. "It must be a dreadful thing to be bowed down to and worshiped so long that you come to believe you are the Lord of Creation. Foster, stop actin' like a child. Esther is comin' here to live; I've told you so a dozen times. It is settled that she is. What I'm

tryin' to do is to make you understand how and why she is doin' it. She's comin' because I practically forced her into it; that's the plain truth. She didn't want to come."

"Then she can stay where she is. You've said enough. It's off, so far as I'm concerned."

"No, it's only begun. Use your common sense, Foster. Of course she didn't want to come here. Perhaps in one way she did; she's wise enough to see what a wonderful chance it was for her to have all the nice things in the world, go on with her music and all that. But so far as you are concerned—why, she hardly knows you. And what she does know, or thinks she knows, isn't to your credit. Her mother—"

He interrupted. "That's the meat in the nut, is it," he growled. "I might have known it. That woman was responsible for Freeling's going to the devil. I told him, before he married her, that she would be, and that if he did marry her he could go just there; I'd never lift my hand again to stop him. And she lied to her daughter, of course. Told her—"

"Oh, never mind what she told her. She was my half-sister and nobody knows her faults, if you can call them that, any better than I do. But so far as your brother is concerned, he was on his way to the Old Harry long before he married Eunice. She helped him up more than she pushed him down. And while we're on the subject I might as well say the whole of it: If you hadn't been so high and mighty and pig-headed and *had* lifted that hand of yours once in a while towards the last of his life he might not have failed in that little business of his. It wasn't drink that killed him; he hadn't touched a drop since he married Eunice. It was fightin' to keep that business goin' that broke him down. If he could have come to you—"

"Well, why didn't he come to me?"

"Oh, you—you *man!* He didn't come because, as you just said, you had told him never to come. You didn't speak to him, nor his wife. And he was a Townsend, too, and as proud as the rest of 'em. And that means Esther. She is proud."

"Well, if that mother of hers—"

"Oh, I know how you always felt about her mother. . . . But there, Foster, all this rakin' up of old squabbles isn't gettin' us anywhere. What I set out to tell you was that Esther didn't want to come to an uncle who had hardly noticed her all her life and who she probably believes—yes, of course she does, in spite of all I've been able to say—was responsible for her father and mother's troubles, and leave me who have taken care of her for years. If I had come she wouldn't have hesitated—much—I guess. To come alone was different. I've been all the forenoon arguin' and advisin' and it wasn't until an hour or so ago she said yes. I left her packin' her trunk and cryin' into it. She doesn't know I'm here now. I came to show you, if I could, the kind of girl she is and what a ticklish position we are all in. You've got to be gentle and forebearin' with her, Foster, or you'll have another smash in the Townsend family; that's the plain truth."

He was leaning against the table, his hands in his pockets. For some few minutes he had been looking at the carpet, not at her. Now he stirred impatiently.

"Well, all right," he said, "I'll be as decent as I can—with my limitations."

"Now don't get mad. You see what I mean. You'll have to overlook some things. She'll be homesick at first. She'll want to run down and see me and I guess you'll have to let her."

"Why shouldn't I let her? I don't care how much she goes to see you."

"You think you don't, but perhaps you will. I know you pretty well. You like to have folks jump when you give an order and to stay where they are when you don't. Be patient with her, won't you?"

"I said I would."

"Well, there's another thing. She may expect me to come up here and see her, sometimes, along in the beginnin'."

"Come ahead! I don't care how often you come."

"I'll try not to be a nuisance. And she'll forget me in a little while, of course. It will be better for her if she does. Her way of livin' and the people she'll have for friends won't be my kind and she'll be ashamed of us by and by."

He turned and looked down at her.

"No, no, she won't," he protested, with a change of tone. "If she does I won't own her. Don't worry, Reliance. You'll see her about as often as you always have. . . . It's pretty hard for you to give her up, isn't it? Eh?"

She rose. "Yes," she said, "it is."

"You needn't do it, if you don't want to. I won't force either of you into it. I'm not sure," he added, with a shrug, "that, since you've hammered the facts into me with a sledge hammer, I'm not taking the biggest chance of the lot."

"I guess not. It ought to be a wonderful thing for her. And as for you—well, if you play your cards right you will have a lot of fun in the game. Esther will be here to-morrow forenoon, she and her trunk. You can send a wagon later on for any other of her things she may want to keep. Good night."

He walked with her as far as the front door. The early dark of a cloudy fall evening was already shrouding the yard and its surroundings. A chill, damp breeze was whining through the bare branches of the elms and silver leaf poplars. Puddles of steely gray water, left after the rain, gleamed coldly here and there. The Winslows, his neighbors across the road, were away in Boston, so there was not even the cheer of their lighted windows to brighten the desolation. It was the most depressing hour of a gloomy day in the dreariest season of the year. And he was the loneliest man on earth, just then he was sure of it. People respected him, or pretended to; they, as Miss Clark had said, bowed down to him; they all envied him; but was there a single soul of them all who really cared for him, who would shed an honest tear if he dropped dead that moment? He did not believe there was one. And, because of his own wretchedness he felt a twinge of pity for the woman who, because she knew it was best for Esther, was giving up

the companionship which meant so much to her. She was going to be as lonesome, almost, as he was now.

"Say, Reliance!" he hailed.

She turned. "What is it?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing in particular." His tone was as gruff as usual, but it lacked a little of its customary sharp decision. "I just wanted to say that—er—well, you needn't worry about that post-office job. You can have it as long as you want it. I'll see that you do."

"You won't have to do any seein', I guess. I haven't heard of anybody's plannin' to put me out."

"You never can tell. . . . Oh, and say, if you should change your mind, if you should feel, between now and to-morrow, that you—well, that you didn't want to have Esther leave you—if you should decide you might as well come along with her, after all—why—"

"Don't be silly. Good night."

CHAPTER IV

THE next morning he sent Varunas to the Clark cottage with a note. The answer, when it came, was to the effect that Esther would be ready just after dinner. At one-thirty Mr. Gifford, wondering what on earth it all meant and not in the least enlightened by his employer, drove one of the Townsend horses, attached to the Townsend "democrat wagon" into the Clark yard and, under the officious superintendence of Millard, loaded a small trunk and a canvas valise—Varunas would have called it a "shut-over bag"—into the carriage. Millard loftily refused to satisfy the Gifford curiosity.

"You'll know pretty soon," declared Mr. Clark. "And so will the rest of Harniss. There'll be some talk goin' around for the next day or so or I miss my guess. No, no, I shan't say a word. You ain't the first one that's asked me what's up—no, sir, you ain't! Tobias Eldridge got after me last night at the post office afore mail time, and he says: 'Say, Mil,' he says, 'what in the world ails you? You're goin' around all puffed up like a toad fish, too grand to open your mouth. What's the matter? Somebody left you a million? If they have you might pay me that two dollars.' I didn't waste any attention on *his* gabble. I don't owe him any two dollars. He says I do, but I say I don't, and my word is as good as his, I shouldn't wonder. I set him to guessin', though. 'Never you mind what ails me,' I told him. '*I* know what 'tis and so does Cap'n Foster Townsend. When I and he get ready to tell we'll tell.'"

Varunas laughed aloud. "You and Cap'n Foster gone into partnerships, have you, Mil?" he inquired. "Tut, tut! He's a lucky man, if that's so. Don't let anybody cheat him, will you?"

Before Mr. Clark could reply to this sarcastic counsel his sister and Esther were out of the cottage. The girl's eyes were wet and even Reliance appeared to be struggling to repress emotion. The pair came down the walk to the gate. There Esther turned, threw her arms about her aunt's plump neck and burst into sobs, open and unrestrained.

"Oh, won't you *please* come, Auntie!" she begged. "I—oh, how *can* I go without you!"

Reliance patted her shoulder.

"There, there, dearie," she said, soothingly. "It's goin' to be all right, you'll see. I can't leave the office now, it's almost time for the noon mail, but I'll run up to-morrow mornin' and see how you are gettin' along." Then, catching sight of the Gifford face upon which was written eager and consuming curiosity, her own expression changed. "Come, come, you two!" she snapped, addressing her brother and Varunas. "What are you standin' there for, with your mouths open? Help her into the carriage, why don't you. Varunas, you take her up to Cap'n Foster's; and mind you drive carefully."

During the short journey to the Townsend mansion Mr. Gifford, whose curiosity was by this time seasoned with a faint suspicion of the astonishing truth, tried more than once to engage his passenger in conversation, but with no satisfactory results. Esther's replies were brief and monosyllabic. She sat crouched on the rear seat of the democrat, avoided his eye when he turned to look at her, and, as he told Nabby afterward, she hardly as much as said ay, yes or no the whole way.

They turned in on the broad drive and stopped at the portico shading the side door. Foster Townsend opened that door himself and came out.

"Well, well, here you are!" he said, heartily. "Come right in. Varunas, take that trunk and the bag upstairs. Nabby will show you where to put them."

He helped his niece to alight and conducted her into the house. Mr. Gifford shouldered the trunk, it was not a big one, and marched through the little hall, across the dining

room and up the back stairs. His wife was awaiting him on the landing.

"Put it in the pink room," she ordered. "And fetch up whatever else there is and put that there, too."

Varunas deposited the trunk in the pink room as directed. Then he turned to his wife.

"What in time—?" he demanded, in a whisper. Nabby nodded impressively.

"I guess you may well say more'n that when you know. She's comin' here to *live*."

Varunas stared. Then he slapped his knee. "I guessed pretty nigh as much," he declared. "The minute I see her and Reliance come out of that house, I—But you don't really mean it, do you, Nabby? You don't mean she's comin' here to stay—right along?"

Nabby nodded again. "That's just what I mean," she replied. "Cap'n Foster told me so a minute or so after you left to go get her. Yes, she's comin' to stay right along—or wrong along—the good Lord only knows which it'll turn out to be. . . . Well!" fervently, "I thought I'd expected 'most everything, but I never expected *this*. Freeling's girl! And Eunice Clark's girl, which is sayin' a lot more! In *this* house! . . . There, there! go get the rest of her dunnage and hurry up about it. I've got somethin' else to do besides listen to your 'by times.' You can say them later on. You won't be the only one sayin' 'em. How folks will talk!"

She was right, of course. All Harniss "talked," as soon as the news reached its ears. Its most distinguished citizen had a habit of surprising his fellow townsfolks, but he had seldom surprised them more completely.

While the Giffords, first of the "talkers," were holding their whispered conversation above stairs, down in the library Foster Townsend and the new member of his household were talking also, but with far less freedom from constraint. At his invitation she removed her coat and hat and sat in the rocker by the table. He, of course, took the easy-chair. She said

not a word. He crossed his knees, cleared his throat, and tried to appear at ease; it was a poor pretense, for he had never felt less so.

"Well," he began. "Varunas got you here safe and sound, didn't he?"

She looked up at him and then down.

"Yes, sir," she said.

"That's good, that's good. . . . Hum. . . . Well, I hope—I hope you're going to like it, now you are here."

She did not look up this time. "I hope—I mean I guess I shall," she faltered.

"Oh, you will! We'll try to make you comfortable. Yes, indeed!"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, we will! Now—er—let's see: Is there anything particular you would like to do this afternoon? Like to go for a ride, perhaps?"

She was afraid to say no, but she could not force herself to say yes. If there was one thing more than another she wished to do, just then, it was to be alone, away from him and every one else, to be somewhere where she could cry as much as she liked. She had an inspiration.

"If you wouldn't mind," she said, hesitatingly, "I think I should like to go to my room—the one I am going to have, just for a little while, I mean. If it will be all right?"

He accepted the suggestion heartily. He was thankful for it. It promised, for the time at least, relief from a situation as embarrassing to him as it evidently was to her.

"Why, yes, yes! of course!" he agreed. "You got your unpacking to do, haven't you. . . . Nabby! . . . No, never mind. I'll go up with you myself."

She followed him through the stiff and stately front hall and up the long flight of stairs. In a wall niche at the landing near the top stood a huge vase containing a cluster of pampas grass, some of its plumes dyed a brilliant blue and the others red. The vase itself was thickly covered with colored pictures,

figures of men and women in Chinese costume, of birds and flowers, of goodness knows what. The vase had been painted a glistening black and the pictures glued to its surface, in hit or miss fashion.

He saw her look at it as they passed.

"Mother—er—your Aunt Bella—did that," he said. "Took her a long time to stick all those things on. She was a great hand for making the house look pretty."

The pink room, when they entered it, seemed, to Esther's unaccustomed eyes, almost as big as the Harniss Town Hall. A mammoth black walnut bedstead, its carved headboard reaching nearly to the ceiling; a correspondingly large marble-topped black walnut bureau; a marble-topped washstand with a pink and gold bowl, pitcher and soap dish upon it; a stiff little walnut desk; at least a half dozen walnut chairs, one of them a patent rocker. It was easy to see why it was called the "pink" room. The gorgeous flowers of the carpet had a pink background; the bedspread was pink; so were the heavy lambrequins above each of the four tall windows. The paper on the walls was of the prevailing color. Everything looked brand new, every piece of furniture glistened with varnish. To the girl, at that first view, it seemed as if the only item in the room not new and grandly becoming, were her own shabby little trunk and the dingy canvas extension case awaiting her on the floor by the closet door. They looked pathetically out of place and not at home.

Townsend gave the apartment a comprehensive glance. The inspection appeared to satisfy him.

"Seems to be all right," he observed. "Nabby and Ellen haven't had much time to get things ready. I only told them an hour or so ago that you were coming. You can trust Nabby, though. Things are generally kept shipshape where she is. . . . There!" he added. "This is going to be your room, Esther. Like it, do you?"

Esther nodded, bravely. "Yes, sir," she said. "It is—is nice and—and big, isn't it?"

He chuckled. "Bigger than what you've been used to, I don't doubt," he agreed. "Well, it is yours from now on, so make yourself at home in it. There's water in the pitcher over there, but if you had rather use the bathroom it is right at the end of the hall out here."

She thanked him. She had heard of that bathroom; so had every one else in Harniss. At the time of its installation it had been the only honest-to-goodness bathroom in the town.

"I'll leave you to your unpacking," he said. "If you need any help or any thing just call Ellen. If you pull that tassel arrangement by the bed she'll come; that's part of her job. Well, good-by. I'll be down in the library. Come down when you are ready."

She did not come down until almost supper time. He was sitting in the easy-chair when she entered. She had changed her dress and rearranged her hair and done her best to eradicate or at least conceal the tear stains about her eyes. He looked up from his paper, gave her an appraising glance which, or so she imagined, took her in from head to heel, and waved his big hand toward the rocker.

"Sit down, sit down," he said. "Well, you look as trim as a new tops'l. Get your things to rights upstairs? Find plenty of stowage room in the closet?"

The closet was as big, almost, as her bedroom in the Clark cottage.

"Oh, yes, indeed," she said, smiling a little.

He smiled also. "Mother was bound to have plenty of closet-room," he observed. "Women like 'em big. When you've had a sea training, same as I had in my young days, you get used to putting up with snugger quarters. Now—er—let me see. Supper will be ready pretty soon, but just now—Humph! Like to read, do you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Women do, I know. There are lots of books in those cases, lots of 'em. I haven't read 'em all, but I guess they're all right. Mother—your Aunt Bella—picked them out and she

generally knew what was what. Help yourself—now or any time. What I should like to have you feel," he went on, obviously embarrassed but very earnest, "is that anything or everything in this house is yours from now on. You are going to live here and—er—you must try to feel that it's—well, that it is home. You understand what I mean?"

"Yes, thank you."

"That's right, that's right. Well, there are the books. Help yourself."

She wandered over to the bookcases. The sumptuously bound volumes posed disdainfully behind the glass panes and seemed to dare her to lay plebeian hands upon them. Their titles, Macaulay's "History of England," Greeley's "American Conflict," Shakespeare's "Complete Works," "Poems of Alexander Pope"—they were not particularly alluring. One majestic, gilt-edge tome was labeled, "Ostable County and Its Leading Citizens." She rather timidly lifted this from the shelf, opened it, and almost immediately found herself facing a steel engraved portrait of her uncle. On the next page but one was another engraving portraying the "Residence of Captain Foster Townsend at Harniss." The article descriptive of that residence and its owner filled five pages of large print. It began:

"Among the names of prominent men of this thriving and beautiful township that of Captain Foster Bailey Townsend stands at the head. His position in civic and county affairs, his strong and unswerving influence for the highest in political matters, his numerous benefactions—"

She had read this far when Ellen drew the portières and announced that supper was ready.

Of all the vivid impressions of those first days and weeks in her new home, the memory of that first meal still remains clearest in Esther's mind. It was so different, so strange, so altogether foreign to any previous experience. She sat at one end of the table and he at the other, the prismed hanging lamp above them casting its yellow glow upon the shining silver, the ornately ornamented china—she did not then con-

siderate it ornate, of course, but beautiful—the water glasses, not one nicked and all of the same pattern, the expensive cloth and napkins. Ellen, neatly dressed and silent of step and movement, brought in the food from the kitchen, placed each dish before the captain, who heaped his niece's plate and handed it to the maid who placed it before her. There was none of the helter-skelter confusion and bustle of the suppers to which she had been accustomed; no jumping up and running to the kitchen; no passing from hand to hand; no hurry in order to get through because it was almost mail time. And, of course, there would be, for her, no clearing away and dishwashing after it was over.

Esther had read a great deal; she was a regular and frequent patron of the public library; she knew that this was the way rich people lived and ate. That she should be doing it—not in imagination; she had imagined herself doing it often enough—but in reality; that she, Esther Townsend, was destined to sit at this table and be thus deferentially waited upon every day, and three times a day, for years and years; that was the amazing, incredible thought. It was like a story; she was like Bella Filfur in "Our Mutual Friend" when her husband, John Harmon, after all their trials and tribulations were ended, brought her to that beautiful house and she discovered that it was to be hers, that she was very, very wealthy and could have anything she wanted—always. Almost like that it was. Why, she herself was rich now, or what amounted to the same thing! *She* could have anything she wanted, her uncle had said so. For the first time she really began to believe it.

She ate little, so little that Foster Townsend noticed and commented.

"Where's your appetite?" he asked. "These things are to eat, not to look at. Don't you feel well?"

She blushed in guilty confusion. "Oh, yes!" she replied, quickly. "It—it isn't that. I was thinking and—and I guess I forgot. I'm sorry."

"Thinking, eh? What were you thinking?"

She hesitated. Then she spoke the exact truth.

"I was thinking that—that it couldn't be real—my being here. It doesn't seem as if it could."

He understood; he had been thinking almost the same thing.

"I guess it is," he said, with a smile. "You are here, and we'll hope you're going to stay. A little bit homesick, are you?"

She started in surprise. She had tried so hard to keep him from surmising how utterly wretched she had been.

"I—I don't know," she faltered. "Perhaps I am—I mean I was—a little."

He nodded. "Natural enough you should be," he said. "Homesickness is a mean disease. I've been homesick myself for the past fortnight or so."

She could not, at the moment, understand what he meant.

"Why, Captain Townsend!" she protested. He interrupted.

"Might as well call me 'Uncle Foster,' hadn't you?" he suggested. "Sounds a little less like town meeting."

Again she blushed. "I—I forgot again," she confessed. Then, catching the twinkle in his eye, she laughed.

"But, Uncle Foster—"

"That's better. What?"

"I don't see why you should be homesick. This *is* your home."

"It's my house. It was my home, but— Oh, well! we'll see if we can't make it 'home' again, you and I between us. Homesickness is mean, though. I remember the first voyage I ever made. Little thirteen-year-old shaver I was, and—"

He went on to tell of that voyage. It was a long one and the story was long, but he told it well. Supper was ended before he finished. They returned to the library. Instead of sitting in the easy-chair he remained standing.

"Er—Esther," he said.

"Yes, sir. . . . Yes, Uncle Foster?"

He rubbed his beard. "I was just going to say," he went on, awkwardly, "that—er—humph! well, the piano is in the

other room—in the parlor. Perhaps you'd like to play on it. I guess it is in tune; the tuner comes every two or three months or so; I hope he earns his money."

She did not feel like playing.

"Why, if you want me to—" she hesitated.

"I shouldn't mind. It would be interesting to see how the thing sounds. About all Mother or I ever did was look at it. Of course, if *you* don't want to—"

"Yes. Yes, I will. But I can't play very well."

"And I shouldn't know if you did, if that's any comfort to you. Ellen has lit up the parlor, I guess; I told her to."

The parlor—even the wife of the great Foster Townsend had never dared refer to it as a "drawing-room" within the limits of Harniss township—was by far the most majestic apartment in the mansion. And, of course, the least livable. The huge rosewood square piano was of corresponding majesty. Esther seated herself upon the brocaded cushion of the music stool and her uncle, after trying one of the bolt-upright chairs, shifted to the equally bolt-upright sofa—in the bill it had been a "divan"—and sat uncomfortably upon that.

"What shall I play?" she asked. There were some sheets of music upon the rack, but they were unfamiliar and look uninviting.

Townsend grunted. "Don't ask me," he replied. "Anything you want to. If you played 'Old Hundred,' and told me it was 'The Jerusalem Hornpipe' I couldn't contradict you."

She played two or three simple airs which her music teacher—he was also assistant to Mr. Wixon, the undertaker—had taught her. Her uncle did not speak during the playing. When she glanced at him he was sitting upon the sofa, his hands in his pockets and his legs stretched out in front of him. He appeared to be lost in thought and the thought not of the pleasantest. Once she heard him sigh.

When, at the end of her third selection, she paused and he seemed not to be aware of it, she ventured to address him.

"I'm afraid that is about all I can play now—without my music," she said. He looked up with a start.

"Eh?" he queried. "Oh, all right, all right! I'm much obliged. Maybe that will do, for now. Suppose we go back into the other room; shall we?"

He rose from the sofa and she from the stool. She was disappointed and a little hurt. He had not offered a word of praise. When they had entered the library he turned and closed the door behind them.

"That is the first time I have been in that room since—since the funeral," he muttered. "Just now I feel as if I never wanted to go into it again. . . . Well, there! that's foolishness," he added, squaring his shoulders. "I shall go into it, of course. We'll go in there to-morrow and then I want you to sing for me. I have heard a lot about that voice of yours."

She did not know how to answer and he did not wait for her to do so.

"You play first rate, I should say," he went on. "You mustn't think I didn't like it; I did. It was only that—well, that blasted room and—and the music together were—Humph! Well, there! Sit down and tell me about your singing. Who has been teaching you?"

She told him. Mr. Cornelius Gott, the undertaker's assistant, sang in the choir, taught singing school in the winter, and a few pupils in private. His voice was a high tenor and his charges low. Townsend grunted when his name was mentioned.

"I wouldn't hire that fellow to learn my dog to howl," he declared. "We'll find somebody better than that for you, if we have to send to Boston. Who picked *him* out?"

Esther resented this contemptuous dismissal of the teacher whom she had considered rather wonderful. He was young and very polite and sported a most becoming mustache.

"Aunt Reliance got him to teach me," she said. "He didn't want to do it at first, for she couldn't pay his regular prices.

If it hadn't been for her I shouldn't have had any one. He taught me to play, too. *We* think he is splendid."

Her uncle ignored the defiance in her tone. He pulled his beard.

"Reliance Clark is an able woman," he observed, reflectively. "It must have meant considerable scrimping on her part to pay even what that numskull charged. She's done well by you, I'll say that for her."

It needed only this reference to her beloved aunt to bring the tears to the girl's eyes.

"I love her better than any one else in the world," she announced, impulsively. "And I always shall."

He looked at her. Then he smiled.

"That's right," he agreed. "You ought to. Well, make yourself at home now. There are the books; somebody ought to use 'em. Do anything you want to. As I said before, this is home and you must treat it as if it was."

He lighted a cigar, picked up the paper and began to read. She wandered once more to the bookcase, but "Ostable County and Its Leading Citizens" was not very interesting, nor was she in a mood to appreciate it if it had been. The temporary excitement of the wonderful supper table and its grandeur had passed and her homesickness had returned, worse than ever. She wondered what they were doing at home—her real home, not this make-believe. It was after nine, so the post office was closed and Aunt Reliance was in the house, in the sitting-room. Was she as lonesome as she, Esther, was at that minute? Oh, if she could only go to her, could run away from this horrid place where she did not belong to that where she did! If she had not promised faithfully! Oh, dear! Why had she!

She turned in desperation.

"If you don't mind," she said, chokingly. "I think I will go to bed now. I—I am pretty tired."

He looked up from the paper. "Eh?" he said. "Tired? Oh, yes, I guess you are. This has been a sort of trying day for you, I shouldn't wonder. Well, to-morrow we'll see if

we can't find something to keep you interested. Ellen has fixed your room. If she hasn't done things as you want 'em done, call her and see that she does. I shall turn in, myself, before long. Hope you sleep first rate. Good night, Esther."

"Good night, sir."

"Eh? . . . You've forgot again, haven't you?"

"I'm sorry. Good night, Uncle Foster."

The pink room was alight, the bed had been opened, her nightdress was lying upon it. She went to the window, but she did not dare raise the shade. From that window one might see the light in the window of the Clark cottage, at the foot of the long hill. She could not trust herself to look in that direction. She undressed, blew out the lamp and got into a bed far softer than any she had ever before slept in. It was a long, long time before she did sleep, however. Homesickness is a mean disease; Foster Townsend was right when he said that.

The next morning was bright and sunshiny and when she awoke she was in better spirits. Being merely called to breakfast, instead of having to go to the kitchen and help prepare it, was of itself a gratifying novelty. After breakfast she accompanied her uncle on his morning round of inspection. In the stables Varunas was awaiting them. His eager politeness, in contrast to the casual everyday manner in which he had greeted her the previous afternoon, was also gratifying. At Captain Townsend's suggestion he led out and exhibited Claribel and Hornet and others of the Townsend stables.

"She is all gingered up and ready to go," he declared, patting Claribel's glistening shoulder. "She'll make that Rattler look like a porgy boat tryin' to keep up with one of them high-toned yachts. I understand," he added, addressing his employer in the confidential whisper he invariably used on such occasions, "that Baker's gang are offerin' ten to seven over there in Bayport. I'm just waitin' for 'em to show up around here and start their hollerin'. There's a five dollar bill in my pants

pocket that's goin' up on Claribel lock, stock and barrel. He, he! Your uncle told you about the game we've played on Sam Baker and Seth Emmons and them?" he asked, turning to Esther. "That was a slick trick, if I did handle it myself. He, he!"

Townsend's eyes twinkled. "You wouldn't guess Varunas was so clever to look at him, would you," he observed solemnly. "He can think up more smart tricks—second hand—than any one you ever saw."

Mr. Gifford's wizened face lengthened a trifle. "What was there second hand about it?" he demanded. "Oh, yes, yes! I recollect now you said you'd heard of its bein' played afore. Well, anyhow," triumphantly, "I was the first one to play it in these latitudes. You'll have to give me credit for that, Cap'n Foster."

Townsend did not enlighten his niece concerning the nature of the "trick." He did, however, tell her of the proposed trotting match at the Circle. She had heard rumors of it before; Millard had talked of it during one entire meal at the cottage. As they were leaving the stables Varunas patted her shoulder reassuringly.

"Don't you worry about it, Esther," he cautioned. "Don't worry a mite. We've got 'em licked afore they start. It takes more'n Sam Baker to come in ahead of us Townsends, don't it, eh? I guess you know that."

So he considered her one of the family already, entitled to the family confidence and sharing the family pride. That was pleasing, too. Just as it was pleasant to have her uncle speak about planting the flower garden, when the time for spring planting came.

"Mother used to attend to all that," he said. "Now it will be your job."

And when she met Nabby Gifford, there also was the same polite acceptance of her authority as one of the Townsends. Not that Nabby's politeness was obsequious, she bent the knee to no one. But she greeted the girl cordially and, far from

appearing to resent her presence in the house, seemed to welcome it.

"I'm real glad you've come here, Esther," she whispered, in the only moment when they were alone together. "You can help your uncle a lot. He needs somebody of his own for company in this great ark of a place and I've told him so. You'll be a whole lot of comfort to him."

Somehow these meetings with the Giffords cheered Esther greatly. It seemed evident that she was not regarded wholly as an object of charity. Almost as if a part of the favor was conferred by her. Her uncle needed her—yes, and he had invited her there because of that need. And she was a Townsend; why, in a way she did belong there, after all. Her homesickness was not so distressing this morning.

She suffered a temporary relapse later on, when her aunt, in fulfilment of her promise, came up to the mansion for a short call. Reliance, however, was bright and cheerful, never showed, nor permitted her to show, the least trace of tears or loneliness, exclaimed at the size and beauty of the pink room, chatted of matters at the post office and millinery shop, promised to come again just as soon as she could, and hurried away in a bustle of good-humored energy. She had gone before Esther could realize that their meeting was but temporary, not the resumption of the old close, everyday companionship.

The girl accompanied her to the door, but Foster Townsend was waiting at the gate.

"Well, how has it gone?" asked Reliance.

"All right enough, so far," was the curt answer. "I guess we'll get along, after we get used to it."

Miss Clark nodded. "*She'll* get along, I know," she said. "She's young and young folks forget the old and take up with the new pretty easy—especially such a 'new' as this will be to her. She'll get along; you are the one who will have to take time to get used to it. Let her have her own way once in a while, Foster. It will be good judgment in the end and save lots of trouble."

He sniffed. "Seems to me we thrashed this all out yesterday," he retorted. "I can handle a skittish colt as well as the next one, maybe. . . . Don't you worry about our getting along. . . . How are *you* getting along—without her?"

She turned away.

"Don't talk about it," she said. "Sometime, when I'm not so busy, I'm goin' up to the cemetery. That will be a bright, lively place compared to my sittin' room just now. But I'll get used to it, too. I've spent about half my life gettin' used to things."

That afternoon Esther had another new and overwhelming experience. She and her uncle went for a drive behind the span. Foster Townsend himself drove and his niece sat beside him upon the seat of the high wheeled dog-cart. The black horses stepped proudly, their curved necks glistening and the silver mounted harness a-jingle. People stopped to look at them as they passed, just as she, herself, had done so often. Then she had merely looked and envied—yes, and resented—the triumphal progress of this man, her father's own brother, who had everything while she and her parents had had nothing. Now she was a part of that progress and, in spite of an occasional twinge of conscience, she found herself enjoying it. The reality of this marvelous change in her life was more and more forced upon her.

Now, as always, hats were lifted in acknowledgment of the royal presence, but now they were lifted to the princess as well as to the king. Proof of this was furnished by no less a personage than Captain Benjamin Snow, who hurried from his front gate and came out into the road. Townsend pulled the horses to a standstill and greeted the man whose influence in Harniss affairs was second only to his own.

"Hello, Ben!" he said. "Well, what is it?"

Captain Ben, short-breathed always and pompous usually, was urbanely deferential.

"Just heard from Mooney," he panted, with an asthmatic chuckle. "He was down to see me last night. Talked about

nothing but that cranberry bill. I judge he has had a change of heart. Says he was up to see you a day or two ago. You must have put the fear of the Lord into him, Foster."

Townsend smiled. "I didn't mince matters much," he admitted. "He'll trot in harness now, I shouldn't wonder."

"He'd better. Going to the rally, I suppose?"

"Probably."

"I hope you do. The sight of you will do more to keep him humble than anything else in the world. . . . Well," turning to Esther, "so you are going to be your uncle's girl from now on, I hear. That's good, that's first rate. My wife and I are coming up to call on you some of these evenings. And you must run in on us any time. Don't stand on ceremony. We'll always be glad to see you. Any of your Uncle Foster's relations are just the same as ours, you know."

This from Captain Ben Snow who, up to that moment, had scarcely so much as spoken to her. And he and the even more consequential Mrs. Snow were coming to call—not upon her uncle, but upon her. She managed to thank him, but that was all.

The only other individual who had the temerity to arrest the progress was Mr. Clark. Millard Fillmore was one of a small group of loungers who were supporting the wooden pillars in front of Kent's General Store, by leaning against them. His sister had sent him to the store on an errand. He heard the proud "clop, clop" of the horses' hoofs upon the road and awoke to life and energy.

"Hi!" he shouted, rushing out. "Well, well! Here you are, ain't you! Good afternoon, Cap'n Foster; good afternoon, sir. Well, Esther, you look fine as a fiddle, settin' up there as if you'd done it all your days. Pretty fine girl, ain't she, Cap'n Foster? Eh? She'll be a credit to you, you mark my words."

Foster Townsend grunted, but made no comment.

"I presume likely you and she think it's kind of funny I ain't been up to see her yet, Cap'n" continued Clark. "Well,

I've meant to, but I've been so busy at the post office I ain't had time to go anywheres. I'm comin' pretty soon, though, you can bet on that. I'll—I'll be up to-morrow—yes, sir, to-morrow."

Townsend lifted the reins. "Anything else?" he asked, impatiently.

"No, I don't know as there is—nothin' special. Oh, yes, while I think of it," lowering his voice, "I'm collectin' a good sized bunch to go to the rally and holler for the cranberry bill. I'll have 'em there. You can count on me for that, Cap'n Foster."

"Get up!" commanded Townsend, addressing the horses.

"I'll be over to-morrow," Millard shouted after them. Then he returned, swollen with importance, to the much-impressed group by the pillars.

Townsend frowned. "Jackass!" he snorted. Then, after a moment, he added. "That fellow is likely to be a nuisance, I'm afraid. I won't have him hanging around the place. I don't want him there. If he comes to-morrow you tell Nabby or Ellen you can't see him."

Esther looked at him. She had never cherished deep affection for, nor a high opinion of, her Uncle Millard, but the sight of him had been a sharp reminder of the home she had just left and all its associations. And the contempt in the captain's tone stung.

"I want to see him," she declared. "Yes, I do."

"What! You want to see—*him!* For heaven's sake, why?"

"Because—because I do. I've lived with him ever since I can remember. *He* is my uncle, too."

Townsend rubbed his beard. His frown deepened.

"Humph!" he grunted. The remainder of the drive was less pleasant than that preceding. The captain said very little and his niece was close to tears. In one way she was sorry she had spoken as she had, in another she was not. For some illogical reason the sneer at Mr. Clark, she felt, included her; it had hurt her pride, and the brusque order that she refuse to

see him when he called was disturbing. Her Aunt Reliance had assured her, over and over again, that her moving to the big house did not mean the slightest change in their relationship; they would all see each other every day at least, and perhaps several times a day. She had relied on that assurance. Now her faith was shaken. If she could not see Millard might not the next order be that she could not see her aunt? That she would not obey—no, she would not.

Townsend, himself, was not entirely easy in his mind. It was early—or so it seemed to him—for symptoms of rebellion in this new relationship. And open rebellion of any sort was an unaccustomed insult to his imperial will. He was ruffled, but it was not long before his strong common sense took command. He even chuckled inwardly at the thought of the girl's defiance. She was no soft-soaper, at any rate. She had a will of her own, too, and pluck to back it. She *was* a Townsend. Well, he had boasted to Reliance that very morning of his ability to handle a skittish colt. He would handle this one, and if tact, rather than the whip, was needed he would use that. When they drove up to the side door of the mansion and he helped her to alight from the dog-cart he was good-natured, even jolly, and ignored her very evident agitation, seemed not to notice it.

During supper and all that evening he was chatty and affable. Esther's wounded feelings were salved by the change in his manner. This was a new Uncle Foster, not the grand, dogmatic, overbearing autocrat she had been taught to dread and dislike, but a good-humored, joking, sympathizing comrade, who took her into his confidence, treated her as if she really was an equal, not a dependent. He told stories, and interesting ones, of his early life and struggles. She began to feel a new understanding and respect for him. He must be a wonderful man to have fought his way from nothing to the everything he now was. And he talked concerning household affairs, even asked her advice as to Ellen, the second maid, suggested that she keep an eye on the latter and see if her share of the

housework was done as it should be. All this was pleasantly grateful and encouraging. It emphasized the impression left by him in their talk about planting the flower garden and strengthened that given by the cordial welcome to the family which Varunas and Nabby had accorded her that morning.

Later on, they went again into the parlor and this time, at his urgent request, she sang. He listened intently and insisted upon repetitions. When the little recital was over he put his arm about her shoulder.

"Your voice is as good as they said it was," he declared, with emphasis. "I don't know much about such things, of course, but I know enough to be able to swear you ought to go on with your music. We'll find the best teacher in the county and if he isn't good enough we'll send you where there is a better one. We'll have you singing in a big Boston concert yet and your Aunt Reliance and I will be down in the front seats clapping our hands. Oh, it's nothing to laugh at; we'll be there."

The mention of her aunt as a member of that audience was the one thing needed to make his praise sweeter. Her apprehensions of the afternoon must have been groundless. It was plain that he had no idea of separating her from her beloved relative. It was only Millard who had irritated him and Uncle Millard was—well, even Reliance, his own half-sister, had more than once confessed, under stress of especial provocation, that he was "not much account."

Esther's bed-time thoughts that night were by no means as dismal and hopeless as those of the night before. Pictures of herself as a great singer mingled with her dreams as she fell asleep. Her last conscious conviction was that she did not hate her Uncle Foster; perhaps, as she came to know him better and better, she might even like him. It was perfectly wonderful, the future he was planning for her.

Down in the library Foster Townsend was lounging in the leather chair and thinking over his new plan of campaign as so far carried out. He was very well satisfied. He was quite

well aware that he had made a favorable impression. Figuratively he patted himself on the back for the happy astuteness which had given Reliance Clark a seat at that concert. *That* was the cleverest stroke of the evening. Not that he intended sharing his niece's future with Reliance or any one else. She was his, and little by little he would make her altogether so. She was a good-looking girl, a clever girl, and he was beginning to believe he had made no mistake in bringing her to his home. With his money and under his guidance she might be, not only the new interest he had sought, but a daughter to be proud of. The little flashes of temper and independence she had shown made the prospect only more alluring. He would make her trot in harness, give him time. His training of the skittish colt so far was not so bad—not so bad.

CHAPTER V

THE first step in that training was, of course, to inspire the colt with trust and liking for her new master. When that trust and liking were established the next move must be to make her so satisfied and happy in her new surroundings that the last lingering regret at leaving the old should fade away. She must be driven with a light hand on the reins, a touch so gentle that she would not realize it was there. Confidence first, then contentment, next the gradual awakening of new aspirations and ambitions—after these the rein might tighten and she could be guided into and along the road he intended she should travel. That was the program. Foster Townsend proceeding to carry it out.

The trust and liking first. That little disagreement following the meeting with Millard was the last between the uncle and niece for many a day. Townsend had learned his lesson. The next day, when they rode behind the span, he stopped before the Clark cottage and suggested that they run in and say "Hello" to Reliance. The latter was busy in the millinery shop and was surprised to see them there. The call lasted nearly an hour. Esther enjoyed it greatly, so, too, apparently, did Miss Clark. Abbie Makepeace, the middle-aged partner in the business, was at first in a state of nervous embarrassment, but their distinguished visitor was so gracious, so chattily affable and easy, so interested in the bits of local gossip she offered as contributions to the conversation, that she ended in complete surrender.

"Well, I declare, Reliance!" she exclaimed, when the shop door had closed. "I don't see where the time has gone, I swear I don't! Seems as if he—I mean they—hadn't been here five minutes. I don't see how folks can say Cap'n Townsend is—well, high and mighty and—and all like that."

Miss Clark put in a word.

"Seems to me I remember hearin' you say what amounted to that, Abbie," she observed, dryly.

Abbie was momentarily taken aback.

"Well—well, if I did I ought to be ashamed of myself," she protested. "Anyhow, he was sociable and everyday enough this time. Why, I felt as if I'd known him all my life. Did you hear him ask me to drop in and see him and Esther any time I felt like it? I—I believe I'll do it some Sunday afternoon. Of course I've been up to the mansion two or three times, when Arabella had a church committee tea or somethin', but I've never been there to *call*."

Reliance smiled. "He can be nice enough, if he wants to be," she said; "but it has to be *when* he wants. Esther seemed to be happy, I thought, didn't you?"

Abbie Makepeace gasped. "Happy!" she repeated. "I should think she might be! My soul to man! Wouldn't you be happy if you'd been just the same as adopted by a man with a million o' dollars? Of course she's happy; she's goin' to have everything on earth she wants from now on. . . . You mustn't be jealous, Reliance. Think of her."

Reliance picked up the bonnet she had been at work upon when their visitors came. She shook her head.

"Who do you think I've been thinkin' about, for goodness sakes?" she demanded. "There, there! get me that ribbon on the shelf behind you. What is that verse I hear the boys sayin'?

"'The rich they ride in chaises.
The poor they—'"

Miss Makepeace interrupted. "My soul!" she exclaimed, aghast. "That's a swearin' piece! I never expected to hear you swear, Reliance Clark."

"Well, you haven't heard me yet, have you? I was goin' to say that the poor had to make bonnets. Let's make 'em. We've lost more than an hour already."

"*I* don't call it losin' . . . Humph! I believe you *are* jealous. I don't see why you need to be. You are goin' up there to have dinner next Sunday. I heard him ask you. There'd be plenty of people in Harniss who'll be jealous of *you* when they hear that. And it pleased Esther almost to death, his invitin' you. I could see that it did."

It had, of course, and the certainty that it would was the reason why Foster Townsend had extended the invitation. Esther had a happy day. That evening she sang and played and her uncle's praise was even more whole-hearted than on the previous occasion. It was nice of him to say such things. He had been very nice to her all that day. And his calling on her aunt, of his own accord, and asking the latter and Uncle Millard to dinner on Sunday was the nicest of all. It seemed almost as if her mother must have been mistaken in thinking him such a dreadful man. Either that, or he was sorry he had been so proud and unreasonable and stubborn, and was determined to make amends to his brother's daughter. If he kept on behaving as he had this day she knew she would like him—she could not help it.

Sunday morning he took her to church and, for the first time, she sat, not in the Clark pew away back under the organ gallery, but down in front in the Townsend pew, where the cushions were covered with green plush and the hymn books bore the Townsend name in gold letters on their cover. Asaph Boadley, the sexton, did not greet her with a perfunctory "Hello." His whispered "Good mornin'" was almost as reverential as his salute of her uncle. The march up the aisle was very trying—they were a trifle late and every eye in the meeting-house was, she knew, fixed upon her. But Captain Benjamin Snow himself leaned over the pew-back to point out to her the hymn they were about to sing.

The dinner at the mansion was the best meal she had ever eaten and it was delightful—and wonderful—to have Miss Clark and Millard Fillmore there to eat it with her. Millard did not talk as much as usual, even he was a little awed by

the occasion. He smoked a Townsend cigar after dinner and accepted another to smoke later on. And when he and his half-sister walked back to the cottage he strutted every step of the way.

Esther accompanied her uncle to the "rally" on Tuesday evening. The Town Hall was packed, and again there was the same stir and whispering when they passed up the aisle between the lines of crowded settees. Men were in the majority, of course, but there were many women there also, and some girls. The men looked at Foster Townsend, but the feminine element centered its interest upon his niece, and Esther wondered if they noticed the new brooch which she was wearing. It was a present from her Uncle Foster, who had bought it from the local jeweler and watchmaker that afternoon. That brooch had been on display in the shop window almost a year—since before the previous Christmas, in fact—and the price upon the card above it was twenty dollars. She had seen it often and her admiration of its beauty was coupled with a vague resentment at the extravagance of its cost. Now it was hers—her very own.

The Honorable Mooney's speech was, it seemed to her, a noble effort. She had never before heard quite as many big words said so loudly or with such accompaniment of gesture. And she noticed that the orator appeared to be looking in their direction almost constantly as he said them. When it was over he hurried from the platform and pushed his way to their side.

"Well, Cap'n Townsend," he panted, eagerly, "I guess you'll have to own that I kept my word. Came out strong enough for the cranberry bill this time, didn't I? . . . How did it sound to you?"

The crowd about them had stopped to listen. There was a hush. Mr. Mooney's hand was extended, but Townsend did not remove his from his trousers' pockets.

"Sounded a good deal as if you had decided to be a bad influence," he observed. "Yes, you came out—to-night. How

you come out on election day is—well, I guess that depends on how sure you can make us that you'll *stay* out—after you get in again."

There was a roar of delighted laughter from the group surrounding them. Mr. Mooney did not laugh. He looked troubled.

The horse trot at the Circle was to take place on Thursday afternoon. All masculine Harniss knew of it by this time. Backers of the Baker horse had visited Harniss during the past few days, had expressed unbounded confidence in the fast-traveling Rattler, and had been quite willing to support their confidence financially. There were perhaps a hundred men and boys gathered about the starting-point when Foster Townsend and Esther drove up in the dog-cart. Esther, looking out over the crowd, felt troubled and out of place. So far as she could see she was the only member of the gentler sex present. Horse-racing, although patronized by Harniss's leading citizen, was not approved by the majority of its best people, particularly the church-going element. At the Ostable County Fair and Cattle Show they hung over the fence and cheered or groaned, their wives and daughters with them, but that was different—all set standards relaxed on Cattle Show days. An affair of this kind was a trifle too much of a sporting proposition, it savored too closely of card playing and gambling; so, although some—including Captain Benjamin Snow—attended, they did not bring their families. If it was any one *but* Cap'n Foster, people said, he would not be allowed to do such things.

The racers, harnessed to the light sulkies—"gigs" they were called in that locality—were trotting easily about the track. Mr. Gifford was driving Claribel, of course, and Seth Emmons held the reins for the Baker horse. Varunas saw the Townsend span make its showy approach along the road and he alighted from the sulky and came to meet its owner and his companion. Varunas was dressed for the occasion, not in the yellow and black satin which he donned for the ceremonious Cattle Show races, but he was wearing the little satin cap

pulled down to his ears and his trousers were fastened tightly about his bowed legs with leather straps. He was swollen with importance and grinning with prospective triumph.

"She's fine, Cap'n Foster," he whispered. "Never handled her when she was in better shape. If she don't peel more'n one extry ten-dollar bill off'n Sam Baker's roll to-day then I'll eat her, and I won't ask for no pepper sass and gravy, neither. Oh, say," he added; "Cap'n Ben Snow's goin' to be judge—says you asked him to—and he wants to talk to you a minute. He's right over yonder. Shall I go fetch him?"

Townsend climbed down from the seat of the dog-cart. "I'll go to him," he said. "Esther, suppose you stay where you are. You can see better up there than you can anywhere else. I'll be back pretty soon. Here, Josiah," turning to one of the youthful bystanders, "keep an eye on the team, will you?"

Josiah, evidently flattered by the opportunity to serve royalty, stepped to the heads of the span. Esther, left alone, tried her best to appear unaware that she was the center of interest for all in the vicinity. Varunas hastened back to the track and clambered aboard the sulky.

The interview between Townsend and Captain Snow was apparently a lengthy one. The former did not return "pretty soon" as he had promised. Esther, looking out over the crowd, saw a number of acquaintances, boys of her own age. Some of them nodded, one or two hailed her. There was Tom Doane, who clerked in Kent's General Store and drove the delivery wagon. The wagon was standing not far away, its horse hitched to a post. Evidently Mr. Kent's customers would be obliged to wait for their purchases until the race was over. Frank Cahoon was with young Doane. Frank, having finished school, was about to leave Harniss for Boston, where he had a position with a firm of shipping merchants. With them was a third young fellow whom she did not know. The trio were looking at her and apparently considering coming over to

speak. Just then, however, her Uncle Millard came bustling up to the dog-cart and she turned her attention to him.

Mr. Clark was ablaze with excitement and importance. He leaned an elbow upon the side of the dog-cart and chatted, quite conscious that people were watching him, and glorying in his place in the sun.

"Well, Esther," he proclaimed, "this is a great day for us, ain't it? We're goin' to come out all right, you wait and see. Cap'n Foster knows what he's about and I tell folks so. Some of 'em try to let me think Claribel hasn't got more than an outside chance, but I laugh at 'em. 'You leave it to us,' I tell 'em. 'We know a thing or two.' That's so, too; isn't it, eh?"

Esther regarded him rather coldly. All of the bystanders were listening, she knew, and some were nudging each other and grinning. She did wish that he would not speak so loudly.

"That's so, ain't it?" repeated Mr. Clark.

Esther's reply was non-committal.

"Perhaps so," she answered. "I don't know what you know, Uncle Millard. Has Uncle Foster told you about it? He hasn't told me anything."

Some of the grins became laughs. Before Millard could frame a satisfactory reply a voice from the track saved him the trouble by furnishing an excuse for departure.

"They're gettin' ready to start," he announced, hastily. "I must be goin'. I'll see you and Cap'n Foster after we've won. So long."

He hurried away. Esther heard her name spoken and turned to find that young Doane and Frank Cahoon and their unknown companion had approached from the rear and were standing by the carriage.

"Hello, Esther," hailed Cahoon. "You've got a grandstand seat, haven't you? How does it seem to be up in the world? Speak to common folks nowadays, do you?"

She colored. This was the sort of thing she had expected

from her school friends, but she did not like it any better on that account.

"Don't be silly, Frank," she said. "What are you doing down here in Harniss? I thought you were in Boston."

"Not yet. Start to-morrow. I wasn't going to miss this horse trot for anybody's old ships. Bangs and Company will have to wait for me, that's all."

She shook her head. "They must be dreadfully disappointed," she said, solemnly.

Doane burst into a laugh. "I guess that will do you for to-day, Frank," he crowed. "Oh, Esther, here is a fellow you ought to know—Bob Griffin, from Denboro."

Bob and Esther shook hands. He was a pleasant-faced young chap, tall, dark-haired and with a pair of brown eyes with a twinkle in them.

"Bob's come over to see what a real horse looks like," explained Doane. "They don't use much of anything but oxen in Denboro. That's so, isn't it, Bob?"

Griffin smiled.

"It is all we have had to use so far to beat any of your trotters, Tom," he retorted. "Perhaps I shall see something different to-day, though. Is your horse going to win?" he asked, addressing the girl.

"It isn't my horse," she replied. "It is my uncle's."

"I know. I've heard a lot about your uncle. Perhaps you've heard as much about my grandfather," he added, with a laugh.

She did not understand. "I don't know who your grandfather is," she said. "What do you mean?"

Cahoon's laugh was loud. "I told you she wouldn't know, Bob," he declared. "You've heard about the Cook and Townsend lawsuit, haven't you, Esther? I shouldn't be surprised if you had. Well, Elisha Cook is Bob's grandfather. There! Now aren't you sorry you shook hands with him? Oh, ho! Now she's scared. Look at her look around for her uncle, Frank."

Esther had looked, involuntarily, but it ruffled her to know

that the look had been noticed. She had heard many times of the great lawsuit, of course—every one had—but she knew almost no particulars concerning it. That Elisha Cook and Foster Townsend had once been partners in business, that they had quarreled, separated and that the suit was the result —so much she knew. And she remembered Millard's description of a meeting he had witnessed between the litigants. "You ought to have seen the glower old Cook give him," said Millard. "Looked as if he'd like to stick a knife into him, I declare if he didn't. And Cap'n Foster never paid any more attention to it than he would to a stick of wood glowerin'. Just brushed past him as if he *was* wood. Foster was all dressed up and prosperous, same as he always is, but old 'Lisha looked pretty shabby. Don't blame him much for glowerin'. He knows as well as anybody else that Foster's got the courts in his pocket."

Esther remembered this now although she had paid little attention to it at the time. And, at the mention of the Cook name her first thought had been of her uncle and what he might think if he saw her in company with the grandson of his deadly enemy. Before she could answer Bob Griffin spoke.

"I don't see why we shouldn't shake hands, Esther," he said. "We aren't running any lawsuits of our own, and if you're as sick of hearing about courts and decisions and lawyers as I am you never will run one. Grandfather doesn't talk about anything else. . . . Come on, let's forget it, *I* say. Tell me who is going to win this race."

Just then the preliminary whistle sounded from the track below them. Frank Cahoon shouted in excitement.

"They're going to start," he cried. "We can't see a thing from here. I say, Esther, let us climb up there with you, will you? Cap'n Townsend won't mind and he isn't here, any way. Come on, boys!"

He started to mount to the seat, but Griffin was nearest and blocked the way.

"Wait till you are invited," he protested. "How about it, Esther? May we?"

She hesitated. "Why—why, yes—I guess so," she faltered. He did not wait for more, but scrambled to the seat beside her. Frank Cahoon and Tom Doane stood upon the hubs of the wheels and clung to the rail of the dog-cart.

The two trotters—or their drivers—were jockeying for position at the start. Varunas was crouched in the sulky seat, his short legs looking more like barrel hoops than ever as each half-circled one of Claribel's glistening flanks. His face was puckered until it looked like, so Bob Griffin whispered in Esther's ear, a last year's seed potato. Seth Emmons, behind the Baker entry, looked far less anxious. His cap was jauntily askew and he was confidently smiling.

There was no judges' stand at the Circle and, of course, no bell to signal starts and finishes. A whistle took its place and now it sounded once more. The racers shot by. They were off to a good start at the very first trial—almost a miracle in a trotting race. The crowd set up a shout. Every one pushed and jostled to see better. Esther leaned forward breathlessly. Prior to her arrival at the Circle she had not been greatly interested in the race. Foster Townsend's penchant for fast horses had been one of the points in his disfavor which her mother had so often stressed. "He will spend a thousand dollars any time on a horse," Eunice used to say, bitterly, "but he could let his own brother die a pauper." Reliance, also, had never approved of what she called "horse jockeyin'." Esther had accompanied her uncle that afternoon because he seemed to wish her to do so, but she had been secretly ashamed of the whole affair. It seemed so "cheap," so undignified—so, yes, almost immoral. Since their arrival, stared at by every one, the only non-masculine in the whole assemblage, this feeling had deepened. She devoutly wished she had not come. As to who won the match, that was a matter of complete indifference to her—she did not care at all.

Now, all at once, she found herself caring a great deal. She wanted Claribel to win. Her eyes shone, her hands

clasped and unclasped, she bent forward to watch the flying sulkies. She was as excited and partisan as the rest.

It was a mile trot, four times around the track. The first round was practically a dead heat. The second almost the same. She grew anxious. So, evidently, did Tom Doane.

"Thunder!" he exclaimed, disgustedly. "That Rattler is doing as well as our horse. Yes, a little better, if anything. What's the matter with Gifford? Why don't he whip her up? He's going to lose the inside place in a minute. Go on, Claribel! Shake her up, Varunas! Give it to her!"

Frank Cahoon was yelling similar advice. Bob Griffin turned impatiently. "Keep your hair on, Tom," he ordered. "Gifford knows what he's doing. Watch him. He's been holding her in every foot of the way so far. Don't worry," he whispered in Esther's ear. "He'll let her out when the time comes. We'll beat 'em at the finish."

Esther was close to tears. "Oh, we must! We *must!*" she gasped.

"We will. . . . Hi! there she goes! That's the stuff! Good girl! *Look* at her leave him!"

She was leaving him. Varunas had suddenly loosened his grip on the reins. Bending forward until his nose was close to Claribel's flying tail he was urging her on. His shrill yells could be heard even above the shouts of the crowd.

"Go it, you, Claribel!" he was shrieking. "Lay down to it now! *Now* they begin to know they're licked! Hi! hi! hi! Lay down to it, girl!"

The Townsend mare was well to the fore as they shot by at the end of the third turn and swung into the last lap. Rattler's nose was scarce abreast the wheel of his rival's sulky. Varunas never stopped yelling for an instant, but as every one else was doing the same thing it was harder to understand what he said. Esther was, although she did not know it, standing up in the dog-cart. Bob Griffin was standing beside her. Josiah Smalley, the youth entrusted with the care of the Townsend

span, had forgotten his trust and was jumping up and down in the rear of the crowd.

The trotters passed the other end of the Circle and were swinging into the stretch. The finish was a matter of seconds. And then something happened. What it was Esther did not then know, but that it was serious there was no doubt, for the whole aspect of affairs changed in a flash.

From Claribel's flank a black strip seemed to burst loose, to shoot into the air, to flap up and down. Her even trot faltered, changed to a jerky gallop. The yells of triumph from the Harniss contingent changed also—to groans, howls of warning, profane exclamations. Rattler was no longer a length behind; he was almost on even terms with the mare.

And then Varunas Gifford proved the stuff of which he was made. By main strength he pulled the frightened animal back into stride again. His whoops of triumph became soothing commands of encouragement. Claribel steadied, crept ahead once more, passed the line a winner—by not much, but a winner, nevertheless.

Esther screamed, clapped her hands and danced in the dog-cart. She was dimly conscious that Bob Griffin was dancing also and patting her on the back. Tom Doane and Frank Cahoon were performing one-legged jigs on the hubs of the wheels. The crowd was wild. And then the Townsend span, who, quite unnoticed had been dancing with the rest, started to run.

Doane and Cahoon fell to the ground, of course. Esther was thrown back to the seat; so was Bob Griffin. The crowd, those of its members standing nearest, scrambled headlong to avoid being hit or run over. The dog-cart bounced and rocked along the road.

It did not travel far. Young Griffin, beyond a startled grunt of surprise when the jerk threw him upon the seat, did not utter a word. He recovered his balance, leaned over the rocking dashboard, seized the trailing reins and, after a short struggle, pulled the horses to a walk and then to a stand-

still. Another moment and a dozen pair of hands were clutching at the bridles and voices were demanding to know if any one was hurt.

Doane and Cahoon were among the first to reach the carriage. When they learned that no harm had been done their elation at Claribel's victory overcame all other feelings.

"We licked 'em, didn't we, Esther," crowed the exultant Thomas. "By thunder! I thought we were gone when that breeching broke. But we weren't! Ho, ho! Pretty fair horses we have over here in Harniss; eh, Bob? And pretty good drivers, too!"

Griffin was out of breath, but laughing.

"Good enough!" he admitted. "Of course, *I* didn't care who won. If it had been a Denboro horse now—"

Frank Cahoon's derisive howl cut him short.

"Oh, no!" he shouted. "*You* didn't care! Did you see him jumping up and down, Esther? Ho, ho! Say, Bob! What do you suppose your grandfather 'Lisha would have said if he'd seen you rooting for a Foster Townsend horse? Oh, ho! Why—"

He did not finish the sentence. The crowd behind him had parted. Foster Townsend himself was standing at his elbow. The great man was not as calmly dignified as usual. He was out of breath and his expression was one of alarm and anxiety. He pushed young Cahoon aside—as a matter of fact, Frank was only too eager to escape—and came to the side of the dog-cart.

"Are you all right, Esther?" he demanded, sharply. "Not hurt or anything?"

Esther was a little pale, but as much from the excitement of the race as from the short-lived runaway.

"Oh, not a bit, Uncle Foster," she declared. "Not a bit, truly. I am all right."

"Sure you are? That's good. Where is that Smalley boy? I told him to look out for these horses. Where is he?"

Josiah was on his way home and not lingering by the way.

"Who stopped them after they started?" demanded Townsend. Hands and tongues indicated Griffin.

"Humph! I'm much obliged to you. You kept your head, I judge, and that is a lot. . . . Humph! You aren't a Harniss boy, are you? What is your name?"

Bob hesitated. Esther supplied the information.

"He is Bob Griffin, Uncle Foster," she said. "He lives in Denboro."

There was a stir in the crowd, then a hush. Many of those present knew that Bob Griffin was Elisha Cook's grandson. This meeting, under such circumstances, was momentous, it was epoch-making—something to be talked about at home, at the post office, everywhere. What would Foster Townsend say when he heard that name?

He said very little. "Griffin?" he repeated. "Oh! . . . Humph! Yes, yes. Well, my niece and I are much obliged to you."

Bob, embarrassed, muttered that it was all right, he had not done anything.

"Well, you did it pretty well, from what I hear. . . . Now, Esther, we'll go home. You needn't worry. They won't run away again, not when I'm at the wheel. . . . Young man, if you will get down from there, I'll get up."

Bob hastily climbed down from the dog-cart. Townsend took his place and the reins. Just then some one shouted his name and he turned. The shouter was Mr. Gifford. His gaudy cap was missing, the perspiration was dripping from his forehead and he was almost incoherent.

"Cap'n Foster!" he panted. "Cap'n Foster! I—I—I declare I don't know how that britchin' come to bust that way! It was a brand-new britchin', too. I never expected nothin' like that. I swear I was—I was—"

"Never mind. You can tell me about it later. You were lucky it didn't lose the race."

"I know it. I know it. But *how* can you foretell a thing like that? I never—well, when that bust—I—I—thinks I—

Now I leave it to anybody—I leave it to you, Esther—you can't foretell a brand-new britchin' is goin' to up and bust on ye, now can ye?"

The rest of his expostulations and excuses were unheard by the pair in the dog-cart. Foster Townsend had chirruped to the span and they were on their way to the mansion.

Esther was prepared for cross-examination by her uncle concerning her meeting with Bob Griffin. He would ask how the latter came to be sitting beside her in the dog-cart, how long she had known him, all sorts of things. He might even forbid her speaking to him when they met again. Her conscience was clear; the meeting had been quite unpremeditated, and, even if it were not—if she and Bob were friends—she saw no reason for behaving other than she had. She meant to say just that. Just because Bob's grandfather and her uncle had quarreled was no reason why she should refuse to be decently polite to a person with whom she had no disagreement. She was neither a child nor a slave. She had consented to give her uncle a trial, to live with him, but he had not *bought* her, body and soul. If he *did* say—

But he did not. He asked questions, of course, but they were about the horses and the whereabouts of Josiah Smalley when they started to run. He seemed to blame himself more than any one else for the accident. His talk with Captain Ben Snow had delayed him, he said, then came the start of the race and he had forgotten everything else—including her.

"I'm glad some one with a cool head was on hand to pick up those reins," he declared. "It might have been a nasty mess if the team had really got under way. I'm thankful it was no worse. And we, both of us, ought to be grateful to that boy."

That was his sole reference to the Cook grandson. Esther's apprehensions were not realized and her ruffled feathers relaxed. The remainder of the conversation was a mutual glorification over the result of the trotting match.

"After all," he chuckled, as they drove up at the side door,

"Varunas had it right when he said they can't beat us Townsends. Eh, Esther?"

Esther nodded gleefully. "Indeed they can't, Uncle Foster!" she agreed. She was proud of the name. It *was* splendid to be a Townsend.

That evening, after she had gone up to bed, the chieftain of the Townsend clan spent several hours in the leather easy-chair thinking and planning. Here was a new and unforeseen complication, one which, he now realized, was certain to be followed by more of the same variety. He should have foreseen it, of course. It was as natural as life, it was what made life. Esther was a pretty, attractive girl. She was bound to attract masculine admiration. As she grew older there would be more of them and the consequent complications were serious. He could not prevent that, therefore he must see to it that her associates were of the right kind. She must have friends—yes; but if he undertook to select some and forbid others there would be trouble. In Harniss the social circle was limited and its boundaries not very clearly defined. If she could be taken away from there, put under careful supervision somewhere else, kept interested in other things, until she was old enough and sufficiently accustomed to the privileges of wealth and station, to judge more clearly—then—humph! But where—and how?

The clock struck twelve and he had reached no satisfactory solution. Whatever was done must be done with diplomacy. The light hand on the rein must continue light for a long time to come. The colt was still a colt—and skittish.

It was the singing teacher who, quite unconsciously, gave him a clue. Mr. Gott came next day, at Townsend's command, to talk over the matter of Esther's musical education. He was surprisingly self-abnegating and honestly outspoken.

"I can teach her about so much, Cap'n Townsend," he said, "but she can go a whole lot farther than that if she has the chance. I'm about as good in my line as anybody in Harniss—yes, or Ostable County—if I do say so, but I don't claim to be as good as the folks up to Boston. They are paid bigger rates

than I am and they can afford to spend more time keeping abreast of their job. If I didn't have to quit music teaching every little while to help run somebody's funeral I might get ahead faster. If nobody died—but there! if they didn't die *I* would. I'd starve to death if I had to live on what I make learning folks to play piano and sing in *this* town."

This frank statement gave Foster Townsend the idea he had been seeking. He wrote to an acquaintance who lived in Boston. This acquaintance was the widow of a former clerk in the office of Cook and Townsend, occupied a small house in the Roxbury district and occasionally "let rooms" or even took a boarder, provided the latter's credentials were of the best. And this widow was under heavy obligations for financial favors extended by her late husband's employer. The reply he received was satisfactory. Yes, indeed, the lady would be only too delighted to provide food and shelter for her benefactor's niece. "If she comes to me I shall look out for her as if she was my own daughter. You may be sure of that." Townsend's answer was brief. "I shall expect you to be sure of it," he wrote.

Then he wrote to the head of the New England Conservatory of Music. When all these preliminaries were settled he took the matter up, not with Esther herself, but with her aunt.

Reliance listened to the plan with evident interest but in silence.

"So there it is," concluded Townsend. "The girl has got a good voice, so everybody says. So good that it would be a shame not to give it every chance to be better. You can't do that down here. She can study at the Conservatory and stay with this Carter woman from Monday till Friday. Jane Carter is a good woman, strict and churchgoing and all that; she comes of a first-class Boston family who stick by her even if she is a poor relation. Humph!" he added, with an amazed grunt, "you'd think Cap'n John Hancock and Commodore Winthrop and the rest of 'em were her brothers and sisters

to hear her talk sometimes. She puts up with my fo'castle manners because she has to, but I always feel as if I was King Solomon's bos'n calling on the Queen of Sheba when I go into that house. Funny, isn't it? . . . Well, Esther will be kept in the straight and narrow path while she is there—and there will be nobody but bluebloods allowed in the path with her. And Saturdays and Sundays, of course—and vacations—she will be down here with me—with us. What do you think of the scheme, Reliance?"

Reliance said she thought well of it. "It will be a wonderful thing for Esther," she declared. "But it will be a little hard for you, I should think. You got her up to your house because you were lonesome. Now you are goin' to send her somewhere else. What is the matter? Isn't your first notion workin' out as well as you expected?"

He jingled the change in his pocket.

"No trouble so far as I'm concerned," he said. "She's a good girl and a clever girl and I want her to have every chance that belongs to her. I am thinking of her, not of myself. . . . Now what are you shaking your head about? Don't you believe me?"

Reliance smiled.

"It is a little bit hard for me to believe you aren't thinkin' of yourself some, Foster," she said.

"What do you mean by that?" indignantly. "Where do I come in on the deal? Do you suppose I *want* to get rid of her? She's mine now and I want her to stay mine. Don't talk like a fool, woman."

Miss Clark was still smiling. "The surest way to get anything out of you, Foster," she observed, "is to stir you up. I learned that long ago."

"Is that so? Well, what do you think you've got out of me now? I've told you the truth and nothing else."

"There, there! I don't doubt a word you've told me. Of course you want Esther to be yours and stay yours. I don't blame you for that. And the surest and quickest way to bring

that around is to put her where there won't be so many reminders of the times when she was somebody else's. I should probably do the same thing, if I were you."

"Look here, Reliance! . . . Oh, well! what's the use? I thought you had more sense. You're jealous, that's what ails you."

"Am I? Well, I guess I am, a little."

"I guess you are, too. If you feel that way why did you tell her to come with me in the first place?"

"I told her to come because I knew she ought to, for her own sake."

"Yes, and I'm sending her to Boston to study music for the same reason. If you think I'm sending her off, making myself a darned sight lonesomer than I was before, because I want to get her out of *your* way you're flattering yourself."

"Then whose way *are* you getting her out of? . . . Well, well, never mind! I think it's a fine opportunity for Esther. She ought to go, and I shall tell her she must. That is what you came here to ask me to do, of course."

He was having his own way once more and his good humor returned.

"That is settled then," he said. "I'm much obliged to you, Reliance. You can generally be counted on to see a light—after you've had the fun of arguing that there isn't any to see. You and I will have to keep each other company while the girl's away. When I get too lonesome I shall be dropping in here to pick a fight with you. There will always be one waiting to be picked, I can see that. You and Millard better come up to dinner again next Sunday. Esther likes to have you."

That evening he told his niece of the great plan. He was prepared for objections but there were none worth mentioning. Esther was too dazzled by the brilliant picture and its possibilities to remember that it meant leaving her new home and Harniss and her Aunt Reliance. Her uncle dwelt upon the future and its marvelous promise of a career.

"If what all hands say about your voice is true," he declared,

"you can climb high, Esther. We'll start you there at the Conservatory and, when you've learned all they can teach you, we'll go somewhere else where you can learn more. I understand that Paris is the place where they teach the top-notchers. All right; I've never been to Paris. I've been to Havre and Marseilles and those ports, of course, but Paris was a little too expensive a side trip for a second mate. We'll go there together, two or three years from now—oh, yes, we will! And maybe some other places before then—on your summer vacations, you know. I haven't been to San Francisco since I was twenty-two. We'll go out there—maybe next summer—just to get me used to cruising again. What do you say to that?"

She was too overcome to say much. And during the remainder of the week he took pains to keep new pictures constantly before her eyes. On Sunday, when, after dinner, she bade farewell to her aunt, there was a temporary let down in her high spirits, but Reliance refused to consider the parting in the least a serious matter.

"Why, you'll be here every Saturday and Sunday, dearie," she said. "And all summer. You and I will see each other almost as often as we do now. Don't let your Uncle Foster see you cryin'. Goodness knows there is nothin' to cry about!"

Monday morning she and Townsend took the early train for Boston. He went with her to the Carter house and Esther liked its white-haired, soft-voiced proprietor at first sight. The next "port of call"—as her uncle termed it—was the Conservatory. She was thrilled by that. Then followed a marvelous shopping tour, piloted by Mrs. Carter, with purchases of gowns and hats and shoes—all sorts of necessities and luxuries. Townsend returned to Harniss on the evening train. His good-by was brief and gruffly spoken, but Esther had a feeling that he was as loath to leave her as she was, just then, to be left. He cleared his throat, started to speak, cleared his throat again and then laid his big hand on her shoulder.

"Be a good girl," he said. "Work hard and make us proud

of you. I'll be at the depot Saturday noon to meet you. . . . Humph! Well, I guess that's all. Good-by."

He strode off down the street. She turned back into the house, feeling like a marooned sailor upon a desert island, with the ship which had left her there disappearing below the horizon. All her resolution was needed to prevent her running after him and begging to be taken home again. If she had it is by no means certain that he would not have done it. The library, which had begun to seem almost a pleasant place again, would now be lonelier than ever. Saturday looked a long way off.

All that winter she studied hard, making progress, earning praise from her teachers and learning to use her really pleasing voice to better advantage. She soon grew accustomed to the new life and to enjoy it. She made new friends, young friends, and Jane Carter was careful that they should be, as Foster Townsend had especially directed, "of the right kind." Each week-end she spent at home in the big house at Harniss. Usually, although not always, Miss Clark and Millard took Sunday dinner there. When, in June, the term ended she came back to be greeted with the news that she and her uncle were really going to California. The tickets had been purchased and they were to start in a few days.

That was a glorious summer, spent amid scenes which turned to realities the pictures in the geographies and books of travel. Foster Townsend was a very satisfactory traveling companion. She had but to mention a wish to visit some new locality and her wish was granted. She had learned to like him long before, now she loved him. As for him, he was happier than he had been for years. He never would have admitted it, but this charming, talented niece of his was now his sincerest, his chief interest. Even the great lawsuit, dragging its eternal length along between one set of lawyers who prodded it on to the Supreme Court and another set who held it back, was secondary. When in his native town he was, of course, still active in politics and local affairs, but Varunas complained that the

beloved trotters were neglected more than they ought to be.

"About all the old man lives for nowadays," vowed Mr. Gifford, "is Saturdays and Sundays. He's either talkin' about what happened last Sunday or what's goin' to happen next Sunday. I told him—last Tuesday, 'twas—that Claribel acted to me as if she'd strained her off foreleg. What do you cal'late he said? 'Hum!' says he, 'did I tell you what the head of the Conservatory said last time I was up there? Said she had as promisin' a suppranner as he'd heard since he commenced teachin'.' What do you think of that for Foster Townsend to say when he had a lame mare on his hands? A year ago and he'd have cussed me from keel to main truck for lettin' the mare get that way. Now if she'd broke her neck he wouldn't have cared so long as Esther's suppranner wan't cracked. Well, she *is* a smart girl, but she can't do 2.18 around a mile track. Bah!"

The second winter in Boston was more wonderful than the first. Esther was becoming accustomed to being a rich young woman and the perquisites of such a position. The city friends were agreeable, occasional evenings at concerts, the theater and even the opera less of a marvelous novelty than at first, although not less enjoyable. She enjoyed the week-ends at Harniss also, but she no longer looked forward to them as oases in a desert of homesickness. She saw her Aunt Reliance and Millard less frequently, not from design, but because her Uncle Foster had always so many plans for those week-ends that she had scarce time to run down to the cottage or the millinery shop. She was less eager to hear the village gossip, less interested in the doings of the townspeople. She heard scraps of it occasionally, of course. Frank Cahoon was at home again, the Boston firm of shipping merchants having decided to risk continuing in business without his valuable aid. Once Millard happened to mention the incident of the runaway and it reminded him of young Griffin.

"He's gone to New York to study paintin', I understand," said Mr. Clark. "Not house paintin'—no, no, he could learn

that just as well or better in Denboro. He's set on paintin' pictures, so a Denboro feller told me. Old 'Lisha Cook, his grand-dad, was down on the notion, says he never saw a picture yet that was worth the nail to hang it on, nor a picture painter that was fit for much *but* hangin'. He wanted Bob to stick to college—he was up to Yale, or some such place. However, the boy had some money of his own—left him by his father's folks, they say—so 'Lisha didn't feel he could stand in the way of his spendin' it even on craziness. 'Let him daub till he daubs away his last dollar,' says the old man. 'Then maybe he'll be willin' to go to work at somethin' sensible.' "

The mention of her rescuer's name caused Esther a momentary thrill of interest. For a month or two after the eventful afternoon of the horse trot she had thought of Bob Griffin a good deal. He was a good-looking youth and he had—well, perhaps not saved her life, exactly, like the hero of a story—but his handling of the runaway span had been almost, if not quite, heroic. At any rate it was the nearest thing to heroism she had known. There was a romantic tinge to the whole affair which was pleasing to remember and she had remembered it for a time. Of late, however, there had been other near romances. There was a young fellow at the Conservatory who was nice—very nice; and still another who would have called if Mrs. Carter had permitted masculine callers. Bob's romance was a thing of the distant past. It happened when she was a girl in the country. Now she was a city young lady with, or so every one prophesied, a career before her. It interested her to know that Bob Griffin was also seeking a career, but the interest was vague and casual.

Foster Townsend was, by this time, entirely satisfied with his handling of the skittish colt. She was well on the way to becoming the stylish and properly paced animal he had set out to make her. It gratified him to notice that she now turned to him for advice and guidance more than to Reliance Clark. He had announced his intention of making her his entirely. He had done it. Life was worth while, after all. If Arabella

did know what was going on in this mortal world he was sure she must approve. The inevitable male was always in the offing, of course. Some day the right man would appear. The certainty no longer worried him. Now, he felt sure, Esther would not presume to choose that man without his help. She was high-spirited still and required careful handling, but she was "trotting in harness" and he held the reins.

CHAPTER VI

ESTHER'S second term at the Conservatory ended in June and she came to Harniss for her long vacation. There was to be no traveling this summer. The visit to Paris concerning which she and her uncle had talked so often and which he still declared they should have some day was postponed.

"When we go over there," Foster Townsend said, "I don't want to be bothered with time. You are going to study your singing, you know, and you may have to stay a year—yes, or longer. If we went just now those lawyers of mine might be sending for me and I should have to come back and bring you with me. Couldn't leave you alone over there among all those jabbering Frenchmen, could I? I guess not! Let me get this everlasting lawsuit off my hands and we'll go in comfort. Confound the thing! I'm getting sick of it. I wish I had bought off Cook in the beginning. I could have done it then, I guess, and saved money."

She laughed at him. "You know you wouldn't have bought him off for worlds," she declared.

"Eh? Well no, maybe I wouldn't. The Supreme Court will step on *his* toes, if the case ever gets before it. Now it looks as if it might get there, but when the Lord only knows. Maybe in six months, maybe not for two years. They are in no hurry down in Washington; everybody on that Court is a hundred years old, more or less. What is a year or so to a gang like that? Well, possess your soul in patience, girlie. You and I will make Paris yet, if we don't die of old age first."

She was, by this time, fairly well acquainted with the basic details of the famous suit, although there was a great deal which she—and most others except the lawyers—did not under-

stand. Elisha Cook and Foster Townsend had once been partners in the shipping and ship-outfitting business, with offices in Boston and in a Connecticut city. The firm was prosperous. Cook, she gathered, was conservative—a fussy old woman, her uncle had called him. He it was who conducted the Connecticut office; he was, at the time, a legal resident of that state.

Foster Townsend was his exact opposite in character and temperament. He was keen, sharp and inclined to plunge, when, in his opinion, the opportunities for plunging presented themselves. Again and again, so he told his niece, Cook refused to profit by these opportunities and the partners lost thousands which they might easily have gained. In consequence there were increasing disagreements. The "square-rigged" shipping business was falling off. The Civil War hit it a hard blow and, although it recovered in a measure from that blow, there were new obstacles in its path—steam and foreign competition —which, so Townsend believed, would kill it eventually. He advocated other ventures—real estate, for example. Fortunes were being made in Boston land, land in immediate proximity to the city. Townsend, on his own initiative, secured options on a large quantity of that land. Cook, the senior partner, flatly refused his consent to the firm's taking up those options. The long series of slighter disagreements culminated in this important one. After more wrangling and dispute it was decided to dissolve the partnership, although the terms of dissolution were not actually agreed upon.

Then Cook was taken ill, an illness which lasted for months. During that illness Townsend went ahead, borrowed money, secured the land and held it. He obtained more capital and plunged still deeper. When Cook recovered sufficiently to attend in the least to business matters, the firm of Cook and Townsend ceased to exist. Elisha Cook took over the Connecticut branch, which was the "outfitting" end of the business and was allotted sufficient money and securities to give him a comfortable, if not large, independence. Foster Townsend was left with options, mortgages, debts—and the chance of a fortune.

He won the fortune. He became a rich man and, after a time, retired and came to Harniss to settle down as its leading citizen. Cook, who also had retired, returned to Denboro, Massachusetts, his native village, to spend the remainder of his life.

But before this the legal complications had begun. They were far too involved and technical for Esther's complete comprehension. Cook claimed his share of the profits from the land deals. There were many questions to be decided. Whose money secured the first options? Was it Townsend alone or Cook and Townsend, who carried on the immensely profitable deals which followed the first one? The determination of the date of dissolution of partnership entered into the affair. Mr. Cook had done something which was called "obtaining service" upon his former partner in a Connecticut court. Townsend, in explaining to his niece, talked of a "bill of equity," whatever that might be. Townsend contested this "service" and then, when his motion was denied, appealed to a higher court. This appeal also was denied. Then Cook sued, on the Connecticut judgment, in a Massachusetts court. After that Esther lost count. The Massachusetts court did something or other which favored her uncle. Then Mr. Cook went at it again and in a new way. There were appeals and denials and things called "writs of error." For year after year, the historic Cook-Townsend suit crawled along, until at last it was to receive a final decision by the highest tribunal in the land, when that tribunal should give it place upon its crowded calendar. Its cost so far had been enormous. How Elisha Cook could afford to carry it on had always been a question. The inference was that his attorneys were gambling with him. If he won they would win. Foster Townsend could afford to pay his lawyers —yes. But he, nor few others, could afford to lose the huge sum claimed and fought for by his opponents.

No one in Harniss believed Cook would win. Their faith in the Townsend star never faltered. He always had his own way in everything; he would have it here. And his own serene

confidence bolstered theirs. He laughed at the idea of failure. He had laughed always when he referred to the case on the few occasions when he and his niece discussed it. Of late, however, it had seemed to her, that his laugh was not quite as genuine and carefree. She gathered that the granting to the Cook forces of the appeal to the Supreme Court had been most unexpected. He was still serenely confident, or professed to be, but she knew he was disappointed. When he declared himself sick of the whole thing and expressed the wish that he had settled with his former partner in the beginning, she laughed and refused to take the statement seriously; but she was surprised to hear him say it.

She forgot the whole affair very quickly, having, for her, much more interesting matters to occupy her mind. She soon forgot her own disappointment at the postponement of the Paris trip. The summer season in Harniss was beginning and, although it was far from the gay activity of a summer season in that village nowadays, it was lively and interesting. The sojourners from the cities were filling Mrs. Cooper's fashionable boarding house and the few cottages were opening. It was the Reverend Mr. Colton's harvest time. His congregations were larger with each succeeding Sunday and the collections larger also. He consulted with his summer parishioners as to the means of raising additional funds for the First Church and it was decided to give an "Old Folks' Concert." He came to see Foster Townsend about it, of course. The great man was not too enthusiastic at first.

"Foolishness," he declared, gruffly. "If I ran my business affairs the way you church people run yours you'd be for having me shut up in an asylum, and I ought to be. You had a fair last winter—just as you have every winter. What did it amount to? All the women worked like blazes making things, or spent money buying things somewhere else, to be sold at that fair. Then every husband came and bought the things the other fellows' wives had made or donated. That's all there was to that."

The minister ventured to protest.

"But, Captain Townsend," he pleaded, "we made over a hundred dollars at that fair. You have forgotten that."

"I've forgotten nothing. You didn't really make a cent. All you did was to swap that hundred dollars from one hand to the other."

The interview took place in the Townsend stables and Mr. Gifford was an interested listener. As a free-born citizen of a democracy he spoke his mind.

"You're dead right, Cap'n Foster," he declared. "That's just what I tell Nabby. Afore that fair last winter she set up night after night makin' a crazy quilt. Spent four or five dollars for this, that and t'other to make it out of, to say nothin' of usin' up my best Sunday necktie and bustin' a three-dollar pair of spectacles and gettin' so cranky I didn't hardly dast to come into the house mealtimes. And when the fair came off 'Rastus Doane bought that quilt for five dollars—not 'cause he needed it; they've got more quilts than they have beds twice over—but because he knew he'd be expected to buy somethin'. And I paid two dollars for a doll his wife had worked herself sick dressin' and that Nabby give me the divil *for* buyin'. 'What do you want of a doll?' says she. 'You ain't got any children. What did you waste your money like that for?' 'I had to waste it somehow, didn't I?' I told her. 'That's what a church fair's for,' says I, 'to waste money. I laid out two dollars to waste and I wasted it quick as I could. After that I could say no to all the rest of the gang and have a pretty good time.' "

Townsend chuckled. "There's your answer, Colton," he said. "Let your Old Folks' singing school, or whatever it is, slide. Go around amongst the congregation and the summer crowd and collect two dollars apiece. You'll have just as much money in the end and no worry or work or hard feelings. Here! here's my two dollars to begin with."

Mr. Colton was not satisfied with this lesson in common-sense finance. He smiled deprecatingly, and shook his head.

"Every one isn't as generous—or practical—as you are, Captain Townsend," he said. "Of course if you are against having the concert it won't be given, but the other people, those I have talked with, are very enthusiastic about it. Particularly the summer visitors, the younger element. They will enjoy taking part. Your niece, Esther, is as eager as the others. We had intended to ask her to be our principal soloist. Every one knows of her charming voice, but very few have had the privilege of hearing her sing. I have mentioned the idea to her and she—"

Townsend interrupted. "Oh, Esther is for it, is she?" he observed. "Humph! Well, if that is so I don't know as I shall stand in the way. It is all foolishness, of course, but—So they want to hear her sing, do they?"

"Indeed they do. The summer people—the very best people—particularly. Your niece has made a great hit with them, Captain Townsend. They have already taken her to their hearts, as the saying goes."

"Oh, they have, have they? Well, she won't give 'em heart disease, I guess. I haven't seen one of their girls yet who is fit to tread the same deck with her."

There was a hint of tartness in the speech which the reverend gentleman noticed, but thought it best to ignore.

"They like her—and admire her—very much indeed," he insisted, eagerly. "Why, Mrs. Wheeler—you know the Wheelers, Captain; New Haven people, Professor Wheeler is at Yale—Mrs. Wheeler herself told me only yesterday that she and her daughter had become so fond of Esther. They felt already as if she was one of their own."

"She did, eh? Well, she isn't theirs, she is mine. . . . All right, all right! Have your concert, if you want to. As for Esther's singing in it, that is for her to settle."

Varunas furnished the last word.

"If she does sing she'll make the rest of 'em sound like crows a-hollerin'," he announced. "Every time Esther starts singin' in that front parlor of ours even Nabby stops talkin'

to listen. And it takes some singin' to fetch *that* around, now, I tell ye."

So the preparations for the concert went on. The rehearsals were few and Esther enjoyed them. At the meeting, when the question of costumes was brought up for discussion, she was not present, having driven with her uncle to Ostable. But the following day—Sunday—when she stopped in at the cottage for a chat with her Aunt Reliance, she learned an item of news which surprised her.

She had not seen Reliance at all during the week just past. As a matter of fact they did not see each other as frequently nowadays. There was no apparent reason for this—at least Esther could have given none. She would have fiercely resented the insinuation that her love for her aunt was not as deep and sincere as it had always been. Nevertheless—and Reliance was quite aware of it—during her second winter away from Harniss, when she returned for her week-end stays, she no longer hurried down to the Clark house the moment Saturday's dinner was over. She came Sunday, provided the Clarks were not dining at the mansion, but her calls were shorter and she had always so many other things to do, so many new interests to occupy her time and her thoughts, that the conversation was likely to be confined to these topics. The heart-to-heart talks and intimate confidences and confessions were much rarer.

Reliance noticed the change, of course, but she did not refer to it, nor hint at the heartache which, at times, she could not help feeling. It was what she had foreseen, had known must be the inevitable result of the complete change in the girl's life. Esther had learned to love and trust her uncle, had become accustomed to wealth and what it gave her, had made new, and quite different friends, was now well on her way to the brilliant future Foster Townsend had planned for her. It was a natural development, that was all. Reliance fully realized this, had recognized it when they parted two years before. And not for worlds would she drop a word which

might cause her niece unhappiness or a twinge of conscience. It was only when she was alone—or with Millard, which amounted to the same thing—that she occasionally permitted her thoughts to dwell upon the certainty that the widening gap between Esther and herself would widen more and more as the years passed.

So when the young lady breezed into the little sitting-room that Sunday afternoon, expensively and becomingly gowned, her cheeks aglow and her eyes shining with excitement in prospect of her part in the concert and the praise which—to quote the Reverend Colton—"the best people" had already accorded her singing at the rehearsals, Reliance met her with the usual sunny smile and cheerful every day greeting. They talked of the gratifying sale of tickets—almost everybody in town was going, so Miss Clark said—and then the question of a suitable costume came up.

"What do you think I had better wear, Auntie?" asked Esther. "Would you hire a costume in the city, if you were I? Mrs. Carter would pick one out for me, I know, if I wrote her. Or would it be better to use some of Grandmother Townsend's things—those she wore when she was a girl? There is a lovely old figured silk in one of the chests in the garret. It doesn't fit me very well, but it could be made to fit with a little alteration. I thought perhaps you and Abbie would help me make it over, if I decided to wear it. Will you?"

Reliance nodded. "Of course," she agreed. "I must say I like the idea of usin' real old things that belonged to real old-time folks better than I do hirin' new make-believes. I've been in Old Folks' Concerts myself. Oh, yes, I have! There was a time when I used to like to dress up and show off as well as the next one. Dear, dear! Why, I remember one Old Folks' Concert when I wore my own grandmother's gown, one she had made as a part of her weddin' outfit. It was a pretty thing, too, and I looked well in it, at least, so they all said. Your uncle took me up to the hall that night in a buggy

he hired at the old livery stable that Elkanah Hammond kept. He wore buff knee breeches and white silk stockings and—"

Esther broke in. "Who did?" she cried, incredulously. "Not—not Uncle Foster?"

"Yes. And his coat was blue, with brass buttons. He—Now what are you laughin' at?"

Esther had burst into a peal of delighted laughter.

"Oh, it sounds too funny to be true!" she exclaimed. "Imagine Uncle Foster wearing things like that!"

"He looked well in 'em. . . . But there! that was—oh, twenty-four years ago. You ask him if he remembers it and see what he says. Now about what you shall wear next week. Why don't you ask Mr. Griffin's advice? I understand he is goin' to have charge of that part—the costumes, I mean."

Esther stared in surprise.

"Who?" she cried. "Mr. Griffin? Who is Mr. Griffin, for goodness' sake?"

"Why, young Bob Griffin, from Denboro. Elisha Cook's grandson. You know who he is. You ought to. He stopped you from bein' run away with at that horse trot two years ago. Didn't you know they had given him charge of all the dressin' up?"

Esther did not know it and she demanded particulars. Her aunt supplied them.

"It was decided at the committee meetin' they had yesterday afternoon," she said. "You were over in Ostable, weren't you; I forgot that. It seems there was a great pow wow, some wanted to wear one kind of thing and some another and then Mrs. Wheeler, the one that has the summer place on the Shore Road, she came marchin' in with Bob Griffin under one arm, as you might say, and a great idea under the other. She knew Bob—I guess her daughter met him in New York or New Haven or somewhere—and she—or the daughter—had remembered that he was an artist and would know all about what she called 'period dress.' Accordin' to what I heard he wasn't so sure about his wisdom as she was, by a good deal, but

he agreed to help if they wanted him to. The older folks hadn't much objection and all the girls were crazy about it, so he was made superintendent of what to wear. He is to be at the next rehearsal, whenever that is."

She paused and Esther nodded.

"To-morrow evening," she said, "in the church vestry."

"Well, wherever it is he'll be there and you can ask him what he thinks of Tabitha Townsend's dress. Yes, Tabby was the name she had to answer to, poor soul; my own grandmother used to tell me a lot about her."

Esther left the Clark cottage with the same old little thrill of interest she had felt when Millard had mentioned Bob's name months before. Now the thrill was a trifle keener, for she was to meet him again. She was not greatly stirred by the prospect; nevertheless it was rather attractive. She found herself thinking about him a good deal in the interval before the rehearsal, wondering if he had changed as greatly as she had, in—oh, so many ways, and if he was succeeding as well with his painting as she with her music. Also she wondered if he had forgotten her. Not that it made any difference, of course, whether he had or not.

Her speculations on that score were quickly settled. She was already in the vestry when he entered, chaperoned by Mrs. Wheeler and favored with the giggling confidences of Marjorie, the Wheeler daughter. Mrs. Wheeler beamed upon the assembly.

"Well, here we are," she announced. "Mr. Griffin informs me that he has given a great deal of thought to the dresses and —er—all that sort of thing, you know, and he has brought over several books of costumes for us to look at. I only hope he realizes how *very* kind we consider it of him. You have all met him, haven't you? You know every one here, don't you, Mr. Griffin?"

Bob smiled assent.

"I think I have that pleasure," he replied. "I—" Then he paused. Esther, herself a trifle late at the rehearsal, had

taken a seat upon one of the rear settees. His eye had caught hers and remained fixed.

Mrs. Wheeler noticed the look.

"Oh!" she cried. "I did forget, after all, didn't I? There *is* one you haven't met. You weren't here Saturday, were you, Esther? Bob—"

But Bob had not waited for the formal presentation. He was on his way to that rear settee. He held out his hand and Esther took it.

"It is all right, Mrs. Wheeler," she explained. "Mr. Griffin and I have met before." To Bob she said: "I wondered if you would remember me."

She was a trifle confused, for she was quite conscious that every one was looking at them. Griffin, if he was aware of the look, did not appear to mind it in the least. His evident delight at the meeting was plain for all to see.

"Remember?" he repeated. "I should think I did! I was hoping you might be here to-day. Mrs. Wheeler told me you were going to sing at the Concert. I have heard a lot about you, you know. They tell me you are the Patti of the affair."

She laughed and blushed. She wished he would not look at her so intently. The unconcealed surprise and admiration in his look might be flattering, perhaps, but were undoubtedly embarrassing. She withdrew her hand from his and tried to appear unconcerned and dignified.

"Oh, hardly that," she said, lightly. "I am going to take part, just as the others are. You are to select our costumes, for us, aren't you?"

"They have dragged me into it. They will be sorry by and by, and I tell them so. . . . Yes, Mrs. Wheeler, I'm coming. I was just telling Miss Townsend that every one speaks of her as the star of the show. She doesn't seem to believe it, but it is so, isn't it?"

Mrs. Wheeler had bustled after him and was standing at his elbow. Her reply was a trifle curt, so Esther thought.

"Oh, yes, yes! Quite so," she said. "Miss Townsend is our brightest luminary, of course. Now, Bob, if you are ready to discuss the costumes, we are. . . . Mr. Griffin is almost like one of the family," she explained to the girl in an audible aside. "We have seen so much of him at New Haven and in New York. Marjorie and he are *great* friends."

Marjorie was the Wheeler daughter. Esther did not like her too well. She had a way of saying mean little things in the sweetest possible manner.

The discussion concerning the costumes was very informal. Griffin exhibited his books of colored plates and offered suggestions.

"As a matter of fact," he said, in conclusion, "I think the more genuine old things you can wear the better. Unless this town is different from Denboro there must be a lot of tip top old gowns and swallow-tails hidden away in camphor. So long as we don't exhibit Henry the Eighth on the same platform with General Scott we should make a presentable showing, I should say. Stick to the period between the Declaration of Independence and the Mexican War, that would be my idea."

The rehearsal followed the discussion. Esther sang her two solos and received her usual dole of compliments, whole-hearted or perfunctory according to the measure of envy in the make-up of the complimenters. When the gathering broke up she rather expected, and to a certain extent dreaded, that Bob Griffin would seek her out and continue their conversation. She would have enjoyed talking with him, but their talk would certainly provoke so much more talk throughout the length and breadth of Harniss that she shrank from the prospect. She was relieved, when she emerged from the vestry, to find him nowhere in sight. Marjorie Wheeler had exercised peremptory claim upon his company, she imagined.

Varunas, driving the span, had brought her to the rehearsal, but she had insisted that she be allowed to walk home. It bade fair to be a beautiful afternoon and early evening, she

needed the exercise and would prefer it. Now, however, as she came down the church steps, she was aware that the sky was rapidly being obscured by dark clouds and she could hear the rumble of thunder in the west. She looked about, hoping that her uncle might have noticed the approaching storm and sent Mr. Gifford and the carriage, after all. Apparently he had not, so she started to walk briskly along the sidewalk. She had walked but a little way when a splash of rain fell upon the crown of her new and expensive hat. She fancied that hat, also the new gown she was wearing. Again she paused and looked impatiently up the road for Varunas and the span. They were not visible.

Then she heard her name called and, turning back, saw a masculine form with an umbrella running in her direction. When this person came nearer she recognized him as Bob Griffin. He was out of breath, but cheerful.

"Just caught you in time, didn't I?" he panted. "I looked around for you when that chatter-mill shut down—the rehearsal, I mean—but Sister Wheeler had me under her wing and I couldn't get away in a hurry. When I did you had gone. I found this umbrella in the entry. I don't know whose it is, but it is ours now. Hope the real owner doesn't get *too* wet."

He grinned broadly and lifted the commandeered umbrella over the new hat.

"Now we must move," he went on. "It is going to rain like blazes. This is what my grand-dad would call a 'tempest.'"

She took his arm and, partially sheltered by the umbrella, they hurried along the sidewalk. She imagined that eager eyes were watching them from each window they passed, but it was no time for finicky objections. The rain was pouring now and continued to increasingly pour. Her feet were growing damp, so were her skirts. Suddenly her escort stopped.

"Wait!" he ordered. "Great Scott! this isn't a shower, it's a flood. We must get under cover somewhere and wait till it lets up. You mustn't drown—not until after that concert, anyhow. They would hang me if you did. Here! this will

do. I don't know who lives here, but they won't put us out, I guess. Come!"

He led her in through a gate in a picket fence and they hurried up a weed-grown walk to a rickety front porch. Bob folded the umbrella and turned to the door. There was a glass-knobbed bell-pull at the side of the door and, before she could stop him, he had given it a tug.

"What are you doing that for?" she asked. "This house is empty. No one has lived in it for ever so long."

He whistled. "You don't mean it!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me? Well, we'll go on to the next one then."

A vivid flash of lightning, almost instantly followed by a thunder peal which caused the windows in the old house to rattle, prevented her reply. The rain seemed to drop from the sky in sheets. It roared upon the shingled roof of the porch. She caught his arm.

"We can't go out in this," she said, nervously. "We must stay where we are—and wait."

He nodded. "I guess you are right," he agreed. "Heavens! what a deluge. It will ease up in a minute. Then we can go on."

It did not ease up, however. Instead, it rained harder than ever. The porch roof began to leak and he raised the umbrella once more. She was obliged to stand close beside him to avoid the drip. It grew dark and the lightning flashes seemed more vivid in consequence. He felt her shiver.

"Not frightened, are you?" he asked.

"No-o, I guess not. But I don't like it very well. Talk, please. Just—Oh, just say something to keep me from thinking about it."

He laughed. "Good idea," he declared. "What shall we talk about? Tell me what you have been doing up there in Boston."

She told him about her studies at the Conservatory, about Mrs. Carter, about the California trip, of the wonderful happenings of the past two years. He asked questions and

she answered them. The lightning and thunder punctuated her narrative and the rain on the roof furnished a steady roar of accompaniment.

"There!" she exclaimed, after a time. "I have said every word I can think of. Now tell me about your painting. You have been studying too. Some one—Uncle Millard, I think—told me you had."

He shook his head. "I've been studying—yes," he admitted. "I haven't been climbing ahead the way you have, though. And I haven't had your encouragement at home. When I told grandfather I had made up my mind to paint pictures for a living I thought he was going to have a fit. He has a relapse every once in a while even yet. I should have done it, though—or tried to do it—if he had ordered me out of the house. It was paint or nothing for me. I had rather do it than eat—and I like to eat pretty well," he added, with another laugh.

His laugh was infectious. Esther laughed, too. "I must say I think your grandfather is very unreasonable," she declared, with a return to seriousness. "Why shouldn't you paint, if you want to—and can? It is a wonderful thing to be an artist."

"So they say. I am far from being one yet, so I can't speak from experience. Oh, well! I don't blame the old gentleman for making a row. He doesn't know. About the only painter he ever had any experience with was the chap who did grandmother's portrait. That portrait is enough to sour anybody on the whole profession. Grandfather is a good fellow. I'm strong for him."

She glanced at him in surprise. The few references she had heard made to Elisha Cook—Foster Townsend had made them—were far from classifying him as a "good fellow."

"Is he!" she exclaimed, involuntarily. "Why, I thought—"

She paused. He nodded.

"You bet he is!" he vowed. "He has been mighty good to me and to lots of others. He doesn't understand, that's all.

You are lucky, Esther. Your uncle does understand, or seems to. He was willing for you to go on with your singing."

Her agreement was but partial. "Ye-s," she said. "Yes, he does understand, in a way. He likes to hear me sing and he helps me to study because it pleases me to do it, you know. Why, the other day I said something about how marvelous it must be to sing in opera. I wish you could have heard him. The things he said about opera and those who sing in it were—well, they were what Nabby Gifford would have called 'blasphemious.'"

Bob laughed at the word, but he was too much in earnest to laugh long.

"There you are!" he exclaimed. "That's it. They don't understand, either of them. They are like all old people, they belong back in another generation." He spoke as if Elisha Cook and Foster Townsend were nonogenarians. "Granddad—yes, and your uncle, too, I suppose," he went on, "were brought up to think that nothing counted but business, buying and selling and getting ahead of the other fellow in a trade, all that sort of stuff. Art and music and—and the rest of it they don't see at all. Well, I do. I don't want to be a business man. I want to paint. And I am going to paint. I'll never be a Rembrandt maybe, but I am making a little progress, so my teachers say, and I'm going to stick at it. Some of these days I shall go to Paris, where the big fellows are. That's the place—Paris!"

She gasped with excitement.

"Oh!" she cried. "Are *you* going to Paris? I am going there, myself, sometime, to study."

"You are! Bully! We can see each other over there, can't we?"

She seemed doubtful. "I don't know about that," she said. "My uncle is going to take me there and he—well, I don't imagine he would be delighted to have you coming to call. You and I belong to—well, to opposite camps, I guess. . . . I suppose," she added, thoughtfully, "if he knew you and I

were here together now, this minute, he wouldn't like it a bit. Probably your grandfather wouldn't be any better pleased."

Bob snorted. "Foolishness!" he declared. "That confounded lawsuit is a nuisance. I'm not going to let it chain me, hand and foot. Why should it? Or you, either? If we want to see each other and talk to each other like—well, like this—I say let's do it. We aren't old fossils and we aren't kids either. I told grand-dad so. *He* isn't going to send me to Paris, though," he added, with a chuckle. "Perhaps he might if I had kept at him—he will do almost anything for me when it comes to the pinch—but he doesn't have to. I have a little money of my own, it comes to me from my mother's people. I can spend that as I please and I am spending it on my art studies. If you and I should be in Paris at the same time, we will meet over there. I'll see that we do. Come now, Esther! Say that you'll see to it, too. Come! let's promise."

She did not promise. She was still thinking of the feud between the families. Her conscience was troubling her a little.

"Your grandfather—Mr. Cook—wouldn't like to have you know me, would he?" she insisted. "Honestly, now?"

"Well—well, perhaps he wouldn't. But—"

"And my uncle wouldn't like it at all. Uncle Foster has been so kind to me that—why, I can't begin to tell you how kind he has been. He is the best man in the world."

"Oh, say! Look here! He isn't any better than my grandfather."

"Bob Griffin! How *can* you say that?"

"But it is so. They are both good men, I guess. But they had a fight and now they have been fighting so long they think all the rest of creation must fight on one side or the other. We don't have to fight, you and I, just because they do."

"But Mr. Cook shouldn't have brought that suit. He was all wrong and it was wicked of him, Uncle Foster says—"

"Now just a minute. You ought to hear what Grandfather says. . . . Humph! I guess there are two sides to that suit,

just as there are to most fights. You haven't heard but one side, have you?"

It was true, she had not, and she was obliged to admit it.

"No-o," she confessed, "I suppose I haven't. But you haven't, either."

His laugh was so unaffected and good-humored that, once more, hers joined it.

"I guess you are right there," he agreed. "Well, let's do this: Sometime you tell me your side—your uncle's side, I mean—and then I'll tell Grandfather's. We can have a real court argument. And until then we'll forget the darned thing. And we're going to see each other in Paris; American lawsuits don't hold over there. Yes, and we'll see each other a whole lot before then."

She shook her head. "I don't think we had better," she said. "Besides—how could we?"

"Why, at the rehearsal and the concert. Yes, and afterwards. I haven't half told you about my painting. I have two or three sketches and things I want to show you. They aren't so bad—not so awfully bad—honest, they aren't. And say, I want to try a portrait sketch of you some day. In your costume, perhaps. That would be fun, wouldn't it?"

Before she could answer a rattle of wheels sounded from the road. They had been so engrossed in their conversation that neither had noticed the slackening of the storm. Now it was almost light again, the thunder peals sounded far away, and the rain was but an intermittent patter. Around the corner beyond the church came the Townsend span and covered carriage. Mr. Gifford was on the driver's seat and peering anxiously about.

"It's Varunas," cried Esther. "He is looking for me. Thank you ever so much for the umbrella, Bob. . . . Here I am, Varunas!"

She ran down the walk. Bob started to run after her and then changed his mind.

"See you at the next rehearsal," he called. "Don't forget about Paris—or the sketch."

Esther did not reply. She climbed into the carriage. Varunas drew a breath of relief.

"Where on earth have you been?" he demanded. "I've been huntin' all over for you. Me and Cap'n Foster was over to Bayport and that tempest hit on top of us afore we knew 'twas bound down this way. Soon's we fetched home he sent me out for you. Been standin' there on that Nickerson piazza all the time, have ye? You don't look very wet. Who was that along with you?"

Esther did not tell him. What was the use? He would only ask more questions.

"Oh, just some one from the rehearsal," she said. "We were waiting there until the storm was over. I am not wet at all. Drive home as fast as you can. Uncle Foster will be worried."

She did not tell her uncle of the meeting and long talk with Bob Griffin. There was no reason why she should not, of course—but perhaps there was less reason why she should.

CHAPTER VII

SHE and Bob met thereafter at the rehearsals. There were few opportunities for confidential chats like that on the Nickerson porch during the storm, but occasionally he saw a chance to sit beside her on a settee when the others were busy and whenever he did he seized it. On one occasion he brought a few of his sketches to the vestry and showed them to her. They were clever—even to a critical eye they would have shown promise—and to her they seemed wonderful. He told her that he had hired an empty shed belonging to Tobias Eldridge on the beach near the latter's property at South Harniss and was to use it as a studio during the summer months.

"It's a ripping place," he declared, with enthusiasm. "Cheap, and off by itself, you know, and looking right out to sea. I can draw and paint there, and have a gorgeous time. It is far enough from home so that I won't be bothered with a lot of people I know dropping in and interrupting and I can have a model once in a while, if I need one. Two or three of the fishermen have posed for me already. They are good fellows. I like to hear them talk. I want you to come down and let me make that sketch of you in your costume some afternoon pretty soon. Will you? The place smells a little of fish, but you won't mind that."

She would not have minded the fish, but she would not promise to visit the beach studio. At the next rehearsal he confided another bit of news.

"I've begun that portrait of you," he said. "Just roughed it in—from memory, you know—but it is going to be good, I can see that already. Oh, you needn't laugh! I sound pretty cocky, perhaps, but—well, I *am* cocky about that sketch. It *looks* like you; honest it does!"

She laughed again. "You haven't seen me more than a

half dozen times altogether," she said. "If your portrait looks like me you must have a pretty good memory, I should say."

He nodded contentedly. "I have—for some people," he declared. His tone was so emphatic, that, although she still laughed, the color rose to her cheeks. She changed the subject.

The evening of the Old Folks' Concert was clear and balmy and the town hall was packed to the doors. Esther, sitting on the platform, with the other singers and looking out over the audience, after the curtain rose, saw many strange faces—faces which did not belong to Harniss—as well as the familiar ones. In a front seat she saw her uncle, big, commanding, much stared at and quite careless of the stares, the flower she had put in the button-hole of his blue serge coat still in place, his gold-headed cane, presented to him by the committee of cranberry growers after the passage of the much-discussed "cranberry bill," between his knees. Nearby were Reliance Clark and Millard, also Mr. and Mrs. Varunas Gifford, Captain Ben Snow and wife, Abbie Makepeace, and many others whom she knew almost as well.

Mr. Cornelius Gott, the undertaker's assistant and local music teacher, conducted. Nabby, whispering across her husband's shoulder to Miss Makepeace, commented upon his appearance. "Looks just as much like a tombstone as he always does, don't he?" she said. "Them old-fashioned clothes ain't took that out of him a mite, have they? You'd think he was standin' up there ready to show folks to their seats at George Washin'ton's funeral, or somethin'."

The opening chorus was received with loud applause. So was Marjorie Wheeler's first solo. Marjorie's voice lacked only depth, height, purity and strength to be very fine indeed, but her play of eye and brow was animated and her self-confidence supreme. She was handed a large bouquet over the tin reflectors of the footlights when she finished.

Esther Townsend's confidence was by no means so assured. She was suffering from stage fright when she stepped forward for her first number. She had sung often before gatherings

at the Conservatory and in Mrs. Carter's parlor, but this was different. It was the first time she had appeared in public in her native town since she was a little girl singing in Sunday School concerts. For just an instant her voice trembled, then it rose clear and sweet and liquidly pure, in an old-fashioned Scottish folk song. There was nothing merely polite or perfunctory in the plaudits at its end. The audience clapped and pounded and demanded an encore. Reliance's round, wholesome face shone, although her eyes were damp. Millard stood up when he applauded. It was a great evening for Millard. The fierce light which beats upon thrones was casting a ray or two in his direction and if strangers were whispering: "Who, did you say? Oh, her uncle! I see." If they were saying that—and some were—Mr. Clark had no objections.

Foster Townsend did not applaud—with hands, feet or the gold-headed cane. His expression was calm. Nevertheless, he was the proudest person in that hall.

Yes, it was Esther Townsend's evening, every unprejudiced witness of her triumph said so. Mrs. Wheeler was a trifle condescending in her congratulations and Marjorie did not offer any, but Esther did not mind. Quite conscious that she made a charming picture in Grandmother Townsend's gown and aware that she had sung her best, she was happy. People wished to shake hands with her—the "best people" and many of them—and her lifelong acquaintances and friends crowded about to say pleasant things. Reliance did not say much. "I can't, dearie," she whispered. "My, but I'm proud of you, though!" Millard would have said much, and said it stentoriously, if his half-sister had not dragged him away. Nabby Gifford cackled like a hen. Varunas's praise was characteristic.

"You done well, Esther," he declared. "I knew you would. They can't lick us Townsends, trottin', nor pacin', nor singin', nor nothin' else, by Judas! You had 'em all beat afore the end of the first lap, and you didn't have to bust any britchin' to do it neither."

Not until after the final curtain fell did she see Bob Griffin and then but for a moment. He pushed through the group of perspiring performers—wigs and padded coats and flounces and furbelows are warm wearing in summer at the rear of a row of blazing kerosene lamps—and caught her hand. His eyes were shining.

"You were great!" he whispered. "By George, you *were* great! Wait till you see what I can do with that portrait after *this!* You are coming down to see it. Oh, yes! you are. I'll just make you."

The carriage was fragrant with flowers when she and Foster Townsend entered it. He put his arm about her shoulder.

"Good girl!" he said with, for him, unusual emphasis. "Good girl, Esther! This settles it so far as that Paris cruise of ours is concerned. It would be a crime to keep you from getting the best teaching there is after you've shown us what you can do with what you've had. Hang on to your patience till that blasted lawsuit is out of the way, and then we'll heave anchor."

The flowers were brought into the library and examined there. Each cluster had a card attached except one. The biggest and finest was from Foster Townsend himself. Esther gave him a hug and kiss.

"They're dear, Uncle Foster," she declared. "Thank you ever so much."

As usual he turned the thanks into a joke.

"'Dear' is the right word," he observed, with a twinkle. "I had 'em sent down from Boston. Must fertilize those greenhouses with dollar bills, I guess. Never mind. Considering what you gave us for 'em they were cheap at the price."

The floral tribute which bore no card was a bunch of pink rosebuds. Townsend turned them over, searching for the name of the donor.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Wonder who these came from. They don't seem to be labeled. Do you know who gave you these, Esther?"

Esther said she did not know. The statement was true as far as it went. If he had asked her to guess it might have been harder to answer. She did not know who had sent the rosebuds, but she remembered a conversation with Bob Griffin, during which she had expressed a love for the old-fashioned "tea" rose. And these were tea roses. She was glad that her uncle's question was framed as it was and that his curiosity was not persistent.

She and Bob did not meet again during the following week. Then, one morning, she found amid the Townsend mail which Varunas had brought up from the post office and left, as was his custom, upon the library table, an envelope bearing her name in an unfamiliar hand. Letters and notes were by no means novelties for her now. She had become a very popular young lady and invitations to all sorts of social affairs, not only in Harniss but in Bayport and Orham and Denboro, were frequent. Wondering what this particular note might be she tore open the envelope. The enclosure was brief.

"Dear Esther," she read. "The portrait sketch is done, all but the finishing touches. I am waiting for you before I tackle those. Can't you come down to the shanty some afternoon soon? I shall be there all this week. I won't keep you long, but you just *must* see the thing. It is pretty darned good, if I do say so. Now do come. I shall expect you.

"R. G."

She tucked the note into the bosom of her dress, thankful that neither her uncle nor Nabby was there to ask troublesome questions. Of course she should not go to the "shanty," as Griffin irreverently named his 'longshore studio. Uncle Foster would not like it if she did—that is, she was almost sure he would not. Other than that there was, of course, no reason why she should not go. She did wish she might see the drawing, or sketch, or painting, or whatever it was. It was a portrait of her and, naturally, she would like just a glimpse of

it. Any girl would. And Bob was so certain that it was good. If her uncle were any one else—if it was not for that lawsuit and his quarrel with old Mr. Cook— But, after all, and as Bob had said that afternoon of the storm, the lawsuit hadn't anything to do with them; they were not responsible for it. Bob Griffin was a nice boy, every one said so. She had half a mind—

By the next day the half a mind had become a whole one. After dinner—Foster Townsend was again away, at Ostable on business connected with the suit—she told Nabby she was going for a walk and left the house. Half an hour later she knocked at the door of the rickety building on the beach near—but fortunately out of sight from—the Tobias Eldridge house. Bob himself opened the door. He greeted her with a whoop of delight.

"So you did come, didn't you!" he crowed. "I thought you would. I knew you had sense and a mind of your own. Come in! Come in! It is all ready for you to look at."

The portrait was on an easel in the middle of the dusty, littered floor. It was an oil sketch in full color and she could not repress an exclamation of delighted surprise when she saw it. There she was, in Grandmother Townsend's gown, smiling from the canvas, and very, very good to look upon, a fact of which she was quite as conscious as the artist.

"Oh!" she cried. And then again. "Oh!"

He laughed, triumphantly. "Told you it wasn't so bad, didn't I?" he demanded. "It isn't finished. There are some points about the face which don't exactly suit me yet, but we can fix that in a hurry, now that you are here. Come now, what do you think of it?"

She thought it marvelous and said so.

"I don't see how you ever remembered about the dress and the funny little bonnet," she said. "Even the lace and the trimming are just right. How could you remember?"

He laughed again. "It wasn't memory altogether," he told her. "I got a copy of the photograph of the crowd which

was taken the afternoon of the dress rehearsal and I worked from that. Then, besides, I made no less than three quick sketches of you in that costume. Once when you put it on for the committee to see; once when you were singing at the dress rehearsal; and the last and best the night of the concert. I was behind the scenes, no one was watching me and I had a great chance."

The mention of the event reminded her. She turned to look at him.

"You sent me those tea roses, didn't you?" she asked.

He nodded. "They should have been orchids," he declared. "Would have been if I could have afforded the price. But you told me once that you liked those old-fashioned roses. Hope you *did* like 'em."

"They were darlings. But you shouldn't have given them to me."

"Why not? I didn't put my name on them, but I hoped you would guess. Nobody else guessed, did they?" he added, a trifle anxiously.

"No-o. No. . . . Well," with a sudden turn of the subject. "I must go now. I think the portrait is splendid and I am glad I have seen it. Good afternoon."

His change of expression was funny.

"Go!" he repeated, in alarm. "Of course you're not going *yet!* Why, what I really wanted you to come here for was to pose for me just a little. The mouth—and the eyes—why, you can see for yourself they're not right. Now, can't you?"

She hesitated. "Well," she admitted, "of course they are not *just* like mine, but—"

He interrupted. "But we'll make 'em like yours," he vowed. "Now you sit down over there—on that chair, where I can get the light as it is in the photograph. The chair is a good deal of a wreck, like about everything else in this ruin, but I guess it will hold you. You see, I want to get—"

And now she interrupted. "Oh, no, I mustn't!" she pro-

tested, hurriedly. "I mustn't stay, really. Please don't ask me to."

"But I do ask you. I've got to ask you. This is by miles the best thing I've ever done and I want to make it as near perfect as I can. Oh, say, Esther; you'll give me my chance, won't you? I don't believe it will take very long."

She hesitated. It seemed cruel to refuse.

"We-ll," she yielded, "if you are sure it won't? Just a few minutes—"

So the posing began. She sat in the wobbly chair, the afternoon sunshine streaming in through the cobwebbed window, while he painted at top speed, chatting all the time. He told of his struggles with his beloved studies, of his hopes and ambitions, and gradually drew her into talking of her own. At last she sprang to her feet.

"There!" she cried. "I must *not* stay another second. It is—oh, good gracious! It is after four now. Where has the time gone?"

He shook his head. "*I* don't know," he replied. "Well, there! it isn't right yet—we must have some more sittings—but it is better. Don't you think so?"

It was better, but even she could see that it was by no means perfect.

"Can't you come to-morrow?" he begged.

"No. I don't see how I can. You see—"

"Then the next day. We've *got* to get it right, haven't we. . . . If I am going to give you this thing I want it to be as good as I can make it."

She clasped her hands. "You are going to give it to *me?*" she repeated.

"Of course I am. I'll probably want to show it a little first. One of my teachers—oh, he is a corker!—I wish you could see *his* stuff—has a summer studio in Wapatomac and he must have a look at it, sure. But, after that, it is going to be yours—if you want it."

"Want it! I should love it! But—but I don't see how it can

ever be mine. I live with Uncle Foster and—well, you know."

He frowned. "That's so," he admitted. "I suppose there would be the deuce to pay if he knew I painted it for you. Don't suppose he would want it himself, do you? *I* needn't give it to him, but you could."

Her eyes flashed. "Why—why, that would be—it might be just the thing!" she exclaimed. "His birthday is the third of next month and—and I could give it to him as a birthday present, couldn't I? He says he wants a new photograph of me, and this is ever so much better than a photograph. Of course, as you painted it, and you are a Cook, he might not—"

Bob broke in. "It might help to show him that the Cooks are good for something, after all," he suggested, laughing but eager. "It might—why, by George!—Esther, if we can get it just right, it might help to soften down this family row of ours a little bit. If it did—well, it looks to me as if it were worth trying."

She was by no means confident, but inclination conquered judgment.

"Perhaps it might help a little," she agreed. "But can you finish it in time for Uncle Foster's birthday?"

"Of course I can, and time enough to show to my Wapatomac man, too. But I must have those sittings. You'll come day after to-morrow, won't you?"

Again she hesitated, but in the end she promised. She came that day and on other days. And with each session in the shanty she grew to know Bob Griffin better and to like him better. And, now fortified by the reasonable excuse that the presentation of the portrait was to be his birthday surprise, she said no word to her uncle nor to any one of her growing intimacy with Elisha Cook's grandson. And the secret might have been kept until the birthday had not Fate, disguised as Millard Fillmore Clark, interfered.

Mr. Clark, as a usual thing, kept away from the Townsend mansion and its environs. He had never been known to refuse an invitation to dine there and might have made his niece's

presence an excuse for spending much time on the premises had not several pointed hints from Captain Foster, backed by peremptory orders from Reliance, made him aware of the possibility that frequent visits might not be welcome.

"I'd like to know why I can't stop in once in a while, just to pass the time of day if nothin' more," he protested, indignantly, on one occasion. "Esther's my relation, just as much as she is Foster Townsend's, as far as that goes. I feel about as much responsibility for her as I ever did. No sense in it, I know, but I can't get over it. Maybe I don't forget as easy as some folks seem to."

Reliance, who was preparing the outgoing mail, kept on with her work.

"I'm glad of that," she observed, calmly. "Then of course you haven't forgotten what Varunas Gifford called you the last time you were hangin' around the stable in his way. I should think that ought to stick in your memory. It would in mine."

Millard drew himself up. "Varunas Gifford is nothin' but a—a no-account horse jockey," he declared. "And maybe you didn't hear what I called him back."

"Maybe he didn't, either. Or perhaps he did; I recollect you looked as if you'd come home in a hurry that day. There, there! Don't you let me hear again of your trottin' at Foster Townsend's heels, tryin' to curry favor. When he wants us at his house he invites us to come there. Yes, and sometimes when he doesn't want us, I shouldn't wonder. Behave yourself, Millard. If you don't know what self-respect is, look it up in the dictionary."

So Millard, although he boasted much, at the store and about town, of his intimacy with the great man, dared not presume upon it. Therefore Foster Townsend was surprised to be accosted by him outside the post office one afternoon and to learn that Mr. Clark had something important to tell him.

"Well, what is it?" he asked, impatiently. "Heave ahead with it. I'm in a hurry."

Millard looked cautiously over his shoulder.

"Don't speak so loud, Cap'n Foster," he whispered. "Reliance is inside there and she's got the door open. I haven't told her what 'tis. I haven't told anybody."

"All right. Then I wouldn't bother to tell me. Keep it to yourself."

"No, I ain't goin' to keep it to myself. It's somethin' you ought to know and—and bein' as I'm one of the family, as you might say, I think it's my—er—well, duty, to tell you. It's about Esther."

Townsend jerked his sleeve from the Clark grasp. He frowned.

"Esther?" he repeated, sharply. "What business have you got with Esther's affairs?"

"Why—why, I don't know's I've got any, maybe—except that she's one of my relations and I think a sight of her. . . . Now, hold on! Listen, Cap'n Foster! She's seein' that Griffin feller, old Cook's grandson, from Denboro, about every day or so. He's got that fish shanty of Tobe Eldridge's—hires it to paint his fool pictures in, so Tobe says—and he's been paintin' a picture of Esther and she goes there about every afternoon. I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't—"

Foster Townsend interrupted. "Here!" he ordered. "Wait! Come over here!"

He seized Millard by the arm and led him down the sidewalk to the shelter of a clump of lilacs at the end of the Clark picket fence.

"Now tell me what you are talking about," he commanded.

Millard told him. Mrs. Tobias Eldridge had seen Esther pass the house one afternoon and had wondered where the girl was going. Two days later she saw her pass again and this time her curiosity had prompted her to go out by the back door and to the knoll behind the henhouse from which she could look up the beach. She had seen Esther knock at the door of the shanty and had heard Bob Griffin's greeting. She told her husband and he, a few days later, mentioned it to Clark.

"Naturally I was consider'bly interested," went on Millard. "Tobias he couldn't make out what she was doin' there and neither could I. 'Looks to me,' says I, 'as if—me bein' her uncle—I ought to know the ins and outs of this. You've got a spare key to that shanty, ain't you, Tobias? Can't we make out to get in there to-morrow mornin' before Bob shows up?' Well, we did and I saw that picture of Esther. Pretty good, 'tis, too, considerin' who made it. I own up I was surprised. 'Bout as big as life, you know, and all colored up, and—"

"Ssh! . . . Humph! . . . How many people have you told about this?"

"Not a soul! Honest, Cap'n Foster, I swear I haven't told a livin' soul. And Tobias hasn't told neither. 'The way I look at it,' he says to me, 'it ain't any of my business, nor my wife's. I'm not runnin' across Foster Townsend's bows,' he says, 'not much. I've told you, Mil, because you're one of the family. You can do what you want to about it. If I was you, though, I guess I'd keep still.' 'You bet I will!' I told him. But, of course, I knew you ought to know about it, Cap'n Foster. I judged likely you didn't know, and for Esther Townsend to be in that fish shanty along with one of that Cook tribe seemed to me—"

"Shut up!" The order was savagely given. "Humph! Here! you don't think others know this, do you?"

"Not a livin' soul except Tobias and his wife—and me, of course. I haven't even told Reliance."

"You keep this to yourself; do you hear? Don't you mention it again."

"Oh, I shan't—I shan't. But—"

"You had better not. . . . There, that'll do. Clear out! I've wasted time enough."

Mr. Clark was disappointed. He had expected thanks, at least, possibly more substantial reward. Nevertheless, it was some comfort to know that he and the Harniss magnate shared a secret in common. His self-respect, to which Reliance had so slightingly referred, was bolstered by that knowledge.

CHAPTER VIII

ESTHER was late in returning home that afternoon. The portrait at last was finished. Even Bob was reluctantly obliged to admit that it was as nearly perfect as he could make it, and his Wapatomac friend had seen it and approved. The final sitting was a long one, however, and it was nearly supper time when she hurried up the path to the side door of the mansion. Her uncle was in the library and, although he looked up from his paper and nodded when she entered, it seemed to her that his greeting was not as hearty as usual. And during supper he spoke scarcely a word. Her by no means easy conscience made her apprehensive and when, after the meal was over, he bade her come into the parlor, she followed him fearfully. Something was going to happen, she did not dare guess what.

He closed the door behind him. "Sit down, Esther," he ordered. She did so. He remained standing. He took a turn or two up and down the room and then swung about and faced her, his hands in his trouser pockets.

"Where did you go this afternoon?" he asked, bluntly, his eyes fixed upon her face.

She started, colored, and caught her breath with a gasp.

"This afternoon?" she faltered. "Why—why, I don't know. I—"

"Come, come!" impatiently. "That's foolishness. Of course you know. Where did you go when you left here, after dinner?"

She did not answer. His shaggy brows drew together.

"I don't wonder you don't want to tell me," he snapped. "You needn't. It isn't necessary. I know where you were. You were down in that fish shanty of Eldridge's and that young Griffin was with you. That is so, isn't it?"

She was pale, but she no longer hesitated. Her reply was promptly given.

"Yes," she said.

He nodded, grimly. "I'm glad you don't lie about it, at any rate," he said. "And you have been going there for a fortnight, haven't you?"

"No. Not for a fortnight. I have been there five times altogether."

"Humph! Why didn't you tell me what you were up to? Did you think I wouldn't be interested?"

"No."

"Then why did you keep it to yourself?"

She met his look with one as steady.

"Because—well, because he was painting my picture—a portrait of me—and I—we didn't want you to know about it until it was finished."

"Is that so!" sarcastically. "Well, well! Did you intend to tell me when it was finished?"

"Of course."

"Humph! . . . I wonder."

Her eyes were beginning to flash. "You needn't wonder," she said. "I am not lying."

If he had been more calm, more like his usual cautious and wily self, he would have comprehended that the glint in those eyes of hers was a danger signal which it might be best to heed. But he was angry and chagrined. Ever since Millard Clark had told him of the meetings in the Eldridge shanty he had been brooding over the disclosure. He was furious at her for keeping the secret from him and more furious at himself for being so easily hoodwinked. His serene self-confidence was decidedly shaken. Apparently this skittish colt was not so completely broken to harness as he had supposed. How many other secrets might she be hiding behind that innocent exterior? And the thought that a grandson of his arch enemy should have shared a secret with her was the crowning ignominy.

"It depends on what you call a lie, I should say," he

growled. "If slipping out of this house time after time and pretending to me that—"

"I didn't pretend anything. If you had asked me I should have told you. I haven't done anything that I am ashamed of. Not a single thing."

"You haven't! Well, then I'm ashamed for you. Sneaking down to that God-forsaken place a half-dozen times a week and shutting yourself up with that—that cub isn't—"

"Stop!" She sprang to her feet, her fists clinched and her cheeks ablaze. "You *shan't* say such things to me!" she cried. "You haven't any right to say them. I don't care if you are—if you have done everything in the world for me. You needn't do any more. I was—I was going to tell you all about it, every word, just as soon as your birthday came, and give you the picture. I— Oh, I thought you would like it! It was going to be a surprise and—and—"

"Here!" he broke in. "Hold on! What's all this?"

She did not heed. The tears were running down her cheeks but they were tears of anger and humiliation. Her utterance was choked with sobs and she was on the verge of hysterics.

"Oh, how *can* you talk to me like this!" she stormed. "Say that I 'sneaked' and that I shut myself up with—with him, as if—as if— Oh, you ought to be ashamed to even think such things! Hinting that he and I—I'll never speak to you again! I hate you! I'm going away from this house to-morrow morning. I don't care what becomes of me! I—oh—!"

She rushed from the room and the door banged behind her. Foster Townsend took a step toward it.

"Esther!" he called. "Here, Esther! Come back!"

She did not come back; he heard her run up the stairs and a distant slam announced that the door of her own room, the pink room, had closed also. He swore disgustedly and, stalking to the library, threw himself into the leather chair. There, behind a cigar which he did not enjoy, he sat for an hour or more trying to think his way out of this new complication.

The sole conclusion which he reached was the unflattering one that he had made a mess of things.

This conclusion remained unshaken all the next forenoon. Esther did not come down for breakfast; she had a headache, so she told Nabby. Foster Townsend did not enjoy his breakfast, either. Later, when on his regular round of inspection, from the door of the stable he saw his niece leave the house and walk hurriedly off up the street. The suspicion that she might be going to meet Bob Griffin crossed his mind, but it was only momentary. He did not believe she was going there. He would have asked her where she was going, but his pride would not let him. He refused the impulse to call after her and tried to find satisfaction in berating Varunas for some trivial oversight in cleaning the stable.

Dinner was another lonely meal for him. Esther had not returned and neither Nabby nor the maid knew where she was. She came in, however, at two and went straight to her room. He went out and, a short time later, he walked, without knocking, into the little sitting-room of the Clark cottage. Reliance was there and she did not appear greatly surprised to see him.

"Hello, Foster," she said. "So you've come, too, have you?"

He grunted. "That confounded brother of yours isn't on deck, is he?" he asked.

"No, he's tendin' the office. Didn't you see him? I saw you go in the shop door."

"I saw that Makepeace woman. She said you were in here."

"Yes, I've been in the house most of the day, except at mail time. I brought my work in here. I rather expected you might come."

"You did? Why?"

"Oh, because—well, I understand it is squally weather up at your house just now."

He glanced at her. Then he sat down in the rocker and crossed his knees.

"Esther's been here, hasn't she?" he growled. "So here is where she went. Well, I guessed as much."

"I should think you might. Yes, she was here and ate dinner here, what little she did eat. Foster, you can handle men but you are a dreadful poor hand with women—and always were."

He snorted. "Damn women!" he exclaimed, fervently.

"Yes, that is what you do, I guess, and it isn't good policy. Now, if you want to, you can tell me your side of all this rumpus. Esther has told me hers."

He told it. It was only when he told how and from where he had learned of the portrait painting that she interrupted.

"Oh!" she said, nodding ominously. "Oh, Millard was responsible, was he? Humph! . . . Well, never mind; he and I will talk later on. Go ahead."

He described the scene in the parlor, keeping nothing back. Her lips were twitching when he finished. He looked up, caught the expression, and smiled, though rather ruefully.

"It was a fool business, I guess," he admitted; "but I was mad clear through. If it had been anybody else. What in the devil did she pick out old Cook's grandson for? I won't have her sparking around with him, not by a whole lot."

"She isn't sparking around with him. He is a nice boy, I guess; every one says he is, and a smart one, too. It's the picture he is making of her in all her pretty things that caught her fancy. It would catch any girl's. It must be a good picture, too. Esther says it is wonderful. I should like to see it."

He twisted in the rocker. "I don't care if it is a panorama," he snapped. "He had the cheek of a brass monkey to paint it. And, by the Lord Harry, if he so much as speaks to her again I'll break his neck."

Reliance laughed. "He is a pretty husky specimen, from what I hear," she observed. "He might break yours first, Foster, if it came to that. . . . Oh, where is your common sense?" she demanded, with a sudden return to seriousness.

"You have been young yourself. Your own father swore you shouldn't be a sailor, and the upshot of that was that you ran away to sea the first chance you got. Don't you know that, for young folks, the forbidden thing is always the temptin' thing? Esther isn't in love with Bob Griffin yet—that is, I am pretty sure she isn't from the way she talks—but she certainly will be if you keep on bullyin' her the way you did last night. That is just as sure as the sun's risin'."

He took a hand from his pocket to rub his beard the wrong way.

"Well," he grumbled, impatiently, "that may be so—or may not. What am I going to do to stop it?"

"Make your peace with her first. Go straight home to her and apologize. Tell her you are sorry you made such a ninny of yourself last night and beg her pardon. Then, if you are careful how you do it, you might perhaps explain a little about why you didn't like her goin' to see Bob. And, if I were you, I should put the most stress on her goin' there without tellin' you. *That* is what—so you must say—hurt your feelin's most. It is what has hurt hers, too. Her conscience was troublin' her a lot about that; she told me so."

"Well, it ought to trouble her. It was a dirty trick to play on me."

"Perhaps. But, remember, she and Bob together were goin' to give you that picture for your birthday. It was to be a surprise for you. . . . It would have been, too, I guess."

She laughed at the idea. He put his hand back into the pocket.

"Well, suppose I do get down on my knees to her?" he said, grudgingly. "What then? That won't be keeping her away from him. How am I going to do that?"

"I don't know exactly. I think I know what *I* should do. First I should go with her to Bob's studio, or whatever he calls it, and see that picture."

He leaned back to stare at her. "What are you trying to do?" he demanded. "Make fun of me?"

"No, of course I'm not. I'm tryin' to show you how to save the pieces, now that you've smashed the pitcher. Tell her you would like to see the paintin' and ask her to take you there to see it. Pretend you think it is splendid, no matter whether you do or not. When they give it to you, take it and be thankful."

He broke out with an indignant growl.

"You're crazy!" he vowed. "Do you suppose I am going to let that fellow give me presents? Be reasonable."

"I am. Esther is givin' it to you; he has only given it to her."

"It is the same thing. You know it."

"Well, suppose it is. Can't you see that your acceptin' it will do more to put you and her back where you were before this upset than anything else in the world? When she sees you willin' to forget and forgive she will be more ashamed of herself than ever for keepin' a secret from you. And she won't keep another one from you—for a while, anyway. Come, that is reasonable, isn't it?"

He did not reply for a moment. Then he raised another objection.

"It looks to me as if it would only make things worse," he said. "If I go down and pat him on the back—instead of knocking him in the head, as I'd like to do—he'll take it for granted I'm satisfied to have him hanging around after her. He will—why, blast it all! Reliance, he'll be calling on her at the house next! Of course he will."

"Well, if he does—if he does, at least you will have them both under your nose where you can see for yourself what is goin' on. And if they get *too* friendly you can do what you've done before, take her away somewhere. You took her to California; now you can take her to—well, to China, if you want to. You can afford it, I guess."

For the first time he seemed to find satisfaction in her counsel. The frown left his face and his eyes brightened. He looked up and nodded.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Humph! That's an idea! Now you *are* talking. That *is* an idea! Humph! All right, Reliance. Much obliged. I'll think it over."

He rose to his feet and turned to the door.

"Say," he said, as if struck by a new and disquieting thought, "you don't ever tell anybody of my coming down here to—well, to talk things over same as we have to-day? You keep it to yourself, don't you?"

She straightened.

"Certainly I do," she retorted, sharply. "Do you think I go around boastin' of it?"

"Well, I didn't know but what—"

"I don't. I'm not so proud of havin' you callin' on me as all that. You used to come to see me years ago and, if I remember, it was I, and not you, who stopped it then. I can stop it again if it's necessary. What do you mean by askin' such a question?"

He laughed. "There, there!" he protested. "Don't fly off the handle. All I meant was—"

"I know what you meant. You are ashamed of havin' to ask a woman's advice and you don't want anybody to know that the great Foster Townsend does have to ask for anything. Of course I don't tell. But if you think nobody knows you come to this house—yes, and doesn't know it every time you come—it must be because you carry your head so high in the air you can't see what is on either side of you. I have been asked a dozen times what you come here for. The last time you came—when Esther wasn't with you, I mean—Abbie Makepeace was waitin' to ask why you did it."

"Humph! She was, eh? What did you tell her?"

"I told her my rent was two weeks behindhand and maybe you'd come to collect it."

"Humph! That wasn't so bad. What did she say to that?"

"Well, if you must know, she said she guessed it was somethin' of the sort. She said she never knew you to go anywhere unless there was somethin' to be got for yourself by doin' it.

You forgot to speak to her the last time you and she met, Foster. That was a mistake."

His newly found good-humor was not shaken by this plain speech. He was still chuckling.

"She was right, in one way, Reliance," he admitted. "I generally do come to you when I want something in the way of horse sense. And I'm free to say I usually get it—with plenty of pepper. I might come to a worse place. . . . Well, whoever else you tell, don't tell Millard."

Her eyes snapped. "Millard!" she repeated. "I'll tell Millard a few things when I get him alone. You needn't worry about that."

CHAPTER IX

HUMBLE pie is not a tasty dish even to the palate accustomed to it. Foster Townsend's palate was distinctly not of that kind. Even to himself he seldom acknowledged that his judgment had been wrong, almost never to another person. Reliance Clark alone, of all his friends and acquaintances, dared tell him that he had behaved foolishly. He bore her blunt criticisms and tart reproofs with a patience the reasons for which he could scarcely have supplied under cross-examination. Her advice concerning Esther had, in previous instances, been good. In this case, although it was neither flattering nor agreeable, it seemed to at least promise a temporary way out and he resolved to take it. If it worked it was worth the brief humiliation. If it did not then he would try something else. That he would not gain his own way in the end was, of course, an impossibility. He always gained it.

Reliance had prescribed the "humble pie." That very evening, after supper, he ate it in his niece's presence. He called her into the parlor and, as he would have said, "got down on his knees." He frankly begged her pardon for losing his temper, for speaking to her as he had done about her visiting Bob Griffin's studio. He explained how he had learned of her doing so.

"I don't suppose I should have minded so much if you had told me about it, yourself," he said. "Of course the idea of your picking out 'Lisha Cook's grandson to be a friend of yours might have stuck in my craw. Naturally I can't help but be prejudiced against any of that scamp's kith and kin. But I realize—I do now that I have had time to think it over—that it was natural enough you should want to see the picture this young Griffin is making of you. I don't blame you for that. If you had only told me about it. *That* was the thing that hurt most. It did hurt me, Esther. Yes, it did!

I would have sworn you and I didn't have any secrets from each other. Seems to me we shouldn't have."

This was the right touch, just as he meant it to be. Esther's resentment melted under it. The tears sprang to her eyes and this time they were not tears of anger or wounded pride. She stammered a confession of her own consciousness of guilt at having kept the secret from him.

"I am so sorry I didn't tell you, Uncle Foster," she declared. "I was going to—I meant to—and then—oh, I guess I was afraid. I know it was wrong. But the portrait is so good—really, it is wonderful. And—and we thought—I thought if I gave it to you for a birthday surprise you might—you might forgive me for letting him paint it."

He held out his arms. She ran to them and with her head upon his shoulder, sobbed repentantly. He stroked her hair.

"There, there!" he said, soothingly. "It's all right now. We won't fret any more about it, will we? And you must take me down to the shanty, or studio, or whatever you call it, and let me see the thing for myself. Will you do that some time? Some time pretty soon, eh?"

She lifted her head to look at him.

"Do you really mean it?" she gasped. "Do you mean you will go—there—with me? And you won't say anything to—to him—about—about—"

"Of course I won't! We're going to let bygones be bygones, you and I. No more secrets and rows between you and your old uncle, eh? No, no, I guess not. We'll go down there together; we'll go this afternoon. And if folks wonder what on earth I am getting so sociable with a Cook for—why, we'll let 'em wonder, that's all."

She threw her arms about his neck and kissed him.

"You are the dearest man in the world!" she declared. "I ought to be ashamed of myself, and I am. *Do* you forgive me, Uncle Foster, really?"

So the reconciliation was complete and the Clark plan had worked satisfactorily so far. But that afternoon, as they

walked along the beach together, Esther had no idea of the emotions hidden behind her uncle's smiling countenance, nor the struggle it cost him to cross the threshold of the Eldridge shanty and meet, with that same smile, the astonished gaze of its young tenant.

Astonishment is a very inadequate word to describe Bob's feelings when Foster Townsend walked in upon him. He turned pale, then red and involuntarily squared his shoulders for the battle he was certain was upon him. And when, instead of opening for a warlike blast, the Townsend lips curved pleasantly and the Townsend hand was extended in greeting, he was too dumbfounded to do or say anything. He stood still, breathed rapidly, and stared.

Esther, quite aware of what his feelings must be, hastened to explain.

"I have told Uncle Foster all about the portrait," she said, quickly. "He couldn't wait until his birthday and made me bring him right down here to see it. . . . Uncle Foster, you remember Bob. At the horse race that day, he was the one who—"

Townsend interrupted. "Of course I remember," he said, with a very plausible imitation of heartiness. "How are you, young man? I understand you've got to be what they call an artist. Esther says you have painted a picture of her that does everything but walk around and talk. She praised it up so that I had to come and see it for myself. Not that I know much about such things. . . . This it, eh? . . . Humph! Well, I declare!"

He had walked over and was standing before the easel. His niece joined him and looked anxiously from his face to the portrait and back again. Griffin, still dazed, looked at his visitors. Foster Townsend whistled.

"Good enough!" he exclaimed. "Well, well! Yes, indeed! Good enough!"

Esther asked a question.

"You like it, Uncle Foster?" she queried, anxiously. "Do you really like it?"

He nodded. "Certainly I like it," he said. "How could I help liking it? For a thing that isn't a photograph it is mighty good, I should say. That dress, now. Why, that's just the way that dress looked on you, Esther. Yes, it is."

"But the likeness, Uncle Foster? Don't you think it *looks* like me?"

He jingled the change in his pocket. "Why, yes," he admitted, though with not quite the same heartiness. "It does look like you—considerably. It's just hand-done, of course, and you can't expect a hand-done thing to be like a photograph. But I should know who it was meant for. Honest, I should," he added, as if with some surprise at the truth of the concession.

Esther was disappointed. "Why, Uncle Foster!" she protested. "I think it is the very image of me."

He shook his head. "I wouldn't say that, quite," he observed. "It isn't as good looking as you are. I'm right there, eh, Griffin? Doesn't flatter her, does it?"

Bob spoke for the first time. He seemed to be in hearty accord.

"You bet it doesn't!" he agreed, with emphasis. "I'm not satisfied with it, of course."

"Why, Bob Griffin!" cried Esther. "How can you say that? You told me yourself you thought it was awfully good."

"Well, I—I think it is pretty fair, considering who painted it; but Captain Townsend is right when he says it doesn't do you justice. I knew that all along."

Townsend may have thought the conversation had proceeded far enough on this line. He stepped back from before the easel and turned to the artist.

"It's a good job, anyhow," he vowed. "I'll be glad to have it. Now then, young fellow, how much do you want for it? What is the price?"

Bob Griffin looked at Esther and she at him. She answered the question.

"Why, there isn't any price," she said. "Bob has given it to me and I am giving it to you, for your birthday present, Uncle Foster. I told you that before we came down here."

Her uncle paid no attention to this. He jingled his change and repeated his inquiry.

"How much will it be, Griffin?" he asked.

Bob smilingly shook his head. "Esther has told you, sir," he said. "I gave it to her. There isn't any price."

"Humph! That won't do, son. . . . Hush, Esther! . . . No, that won't do. You are figuring to earn a living at this sort of work, aren't you?"

"Yes. I—well, I hope to some day. But—"

"There aren't any 'buts.' You've worked a good many days at this job—must have. No reason why you shouldn't get your regular wages. I want this picture and I can afford to pay for it. How much?"

Again Griffin shook his head.

"It isn't for sale, Captain Townsend," he declared. "I have given it to Esther. It is hers. Of course, if she wants to sell it, that is different. But I can't. It isn't mine."

"Rubbish! There's no reason why you should give it to anybody. And I don't intend you shall. I'm going to buy it. That is settled."

"No, sir, I'm afraid it isn't settled—in that way. You can't buy it from me."

Foster Townsend's brows drew together in the way which his niece recognized as a storm signal. She tried to avert the hurricane.

"It is mine, Uncle Foster," she protested. "Don't you see? It is mine now and it is going to be yours. I—"

"Hush! See here, young fellow, you've forgotten one thing, I guess. Maybe I don't care to have Esther take presents from—" he paused, coughed and added gruffly, "from anybody. Perhaps I don't. . . . Here, I tell you! If you won't sell it to me, sell it to her. I'll see that she gets the money to pay for it. Now, then, how much?"

Bob still smiled. His reply was just as good-natured, but also just as firm.

"Esther can't buy it, either," he said. "No one can. If she won't have it as a present from me—why, then I'll keep it for my own. I shouldn't mind having it in the least," he added, with a twinkle.

It was this last sentence which caused Foster Townsend to hesitate. The roar which his niece had dreaded and which Griffin had expected was not uttered. He scowled, took a turn to the doorway, stood there for a moment looking out, and when he turned back the scowl had disappeared. The corner of his lip lifted in a one-sided smile of surrender.

"You are a stubborn young mule, aren't you," he observed. "All right, do as you please. If money is no object to you it is to me and I ought to be thankful to save a little, I suppose. Esther, I'm much obliged for my birthday present. . . . Well, Griffin, you'll go so far as to let me send Varunas for the thing, won't you? Won't insist on fetching it up to the door with your own hands?"

Bob, very much surprised—he could scarcely believe that his all powerful opponent had actually capitulated—laughed and stammered that he guessed there would be no objection to Varunas's acting as carrier. Before he could say more his visitors had bade him good afternoon and departed. It was not until they had gone that he remembered that neither he, nor Esther, had mentioned meeting again.

His surprise would have been still greater if he could have heard a remark made by Foster Townsend to his niece as the pair walked along the path toward home.

"There's just one thing I do want you to promise me, Esther," Townsend said. "I want you to promise me that you won't go down to that shanty again alone. Harniss isn't a very big place and there is always talk enough in it for a square meal. No use giving it a Thanksgiving indigestion unless it's necessary. Will you promise me that?"

She hesitated. She, too, had suddenly become conscious of

the fact that the parting between Bob Griffin and herself was, in all probability, a final one.

"Why—why, yes, Uncle Foster," she faltered. "I will promise, if you want me to. But—oh, please don't think—"

"There, there! I don't think anything. If he wants to see you, and you want to see him, let him come to the house once in a while. I shan't make any objections to that—if he doesn't come too often."

She caught her breath. This was unbelievable.

"Why—why, Uncle Foster!" she cried. "Of course he won't come *there!*"

He smiled, grimly. "Won't he?" he observed. "Humph! I notice there are other young squirts dropping in on us now and then, these days. Maybe he won't, but I wouldn't bet on it. Judging by the way he stood up to me about that picture he'll do 'most anything he sets out to do, or try to, anyhow. . . . Humph! Well, we'll see."

Esther was overwhelmed. Knowing, as she did, how fiercely bitter was the hatred borne by her uncle to any one remotely connected with the name of Cook, such a concession as this amounted to tremendous personal sacrifice. And he was making that sacrifice solely because of her. If any compelling force was needful to strengthen her resolve to keep the promise just made this proof of his devotion furnished it. She then and there made up her mind that, if Bob *did* call—which, of course, he would not—she would not be too cordial. She would be nice to him, just as she was to others, but she would not encourage him to call often. And, if the calls became too frequent, she would see that they were discontinued. And Captain Foster Townsend, looking down at her as she walked in silence beside him, guessed her thought and smiled in triumph.

His estimate of the young man's determination and character was soon proved correct. On an evening of that same week the Townsend doorbell rang. The maid was out and Nabby opened the door. She came back to the library wearing an

expression which caused her employer to look at her in surprise.

"Well?" he demanded. "What's happened? Is the meeting-house on fire?"

Nabby shook her head. "It's somebody come," she stammered.

Esther, who was reading a book, looked up. Her uncle sniffed impatiently.

"Somebody come!" he repeated, with sarcasm. "Humph! You surprise me! Naturally, when I heard the bell ring I thought it was somebody just going. . . . Well, well! Who is it? Don't you know?"

Mrs. Gifford nodded. "Course I know!" she declared. "If I didn't know I wouldn't have been so took back. It's—" she leaned forward to whisper the incredible name—"it's a *Cook!*"

Townsend did not understand. "A cook!" he snorted. "Whose cook? What does she want? What in the devil is she doing at the front door?"

Nabby raised a warning hand. "Sshh!" she begged, in alarm. "My soul and body, Cap'n Foster! he'll hear you if you holler like that. . . . It ain't that kind of a cook. It's a—a 'Lisha Cook."

"What!"

He leaped from the chair. Esther rose, too. She caught his sleeve.

"Hush, Uncle Foster!" she whispered. "Nabby doesn't mean old Mr. Cook himself. I am sure she doesn't."

Something in her tone caused her uncle to look down at her. A thought came to him.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Do you know who it is, Esther?"

"No-o. No, I don't. But I just wondered if—you know you said he *might* come and—"

He interrupted. "Oh!" he exclaimed. "Yes, yes. . . . Is it young Griffin, Nabby?"

Nabby nodded. "That's just who 'tis," she said. "*He's* a

Cook, ain't he? And when I see him standin' there right in front of me, as bold as brass, I vow I—"

Townsend broke in once more. He laughed, shortly. "I see," he said. "Well, bring him in, Nabby."

Nabby gasped. "You mean fetch him in *here?*" she demanded, incredulously.

"Yes. And hurry up about it." Then, turning to his niece, he added, "Told you he would come, didn't I, Esther? He's a Cook, right enough."

But when Bob followed Nabby into the library he greeted him pleasantly, bade him be seated, and even offered him a cigar. He was the least embarrassed of the three. Esther was confused and Bob, himself, was not wholly self-possessed. He apologized for calling without an invitation, but said he just simply could not wait longer to see how the portrait looked in its new quarters.

"I know you are surprised to see me here, Captain Townsend," he went on. "Perhaps I shouldn't have come. My family and yours—are—well, they aren't, of course. But I did want to see that portrait."

Townsend nodded. "Natural enough you should," he agreed. "And you didn't bring your family with you, I guess likely. Well, the picture is in the parlor and Esther will show it to you. If you will excuse me I'm going upstairs. I've got some letters to write."

He went out, leaving the two alone. Esther had not expected this and was not altogether pleased. She comprehended —or thought she did—that her uncle's leaving her alone with the caller was his way of showing that he trusted her. It was very noble of him, but it made her uncomfortable, almost as if she were doing something wicked. Consequently her manner was distrait and her replies to Bob's sallies brief and perfunctory. The call was a short one. He left before ten, but at the door he said:

"You'll come down to the shanty again before long, won't you, Esther?"

She shook her head. "No," she replied. "I shan't come there any more."

"Why not?"

"Because Uncle Foster thinks I shouldn't. He says people would talk if I did. He is right, of course. Perhaps they are talking now."

"Talk! They'll talk anyway. They'll talk after they are dead, some of them. . . . Well, then I shall come here to see you. I can do that, can't I?"

"I—I don't think you had better."

"Don't you want to see me?"

She hesitated. "That hasn't anything to do with it, really," she declared. "You know it hasn't, Bob. When you think of your grandfather and my uncle—"

"I won't," he broke in, emphatically. "That is just what I won't do. And you mustn't either. You and I ought to think of ourselves. We agreed, that afternoon of the thunderstorm, that we hadn't anything to do with a family row which is already years and years old. If you can't come to see me I am coming to see you. And I shall."

"But uncle—"

"I'm not coming to see him. And—why, he was nice enough to me this evening. I rather expected he might tell me to clear out, but he didn't."

"No, he didn't. But I am sure he doesn't like it. How can he? Your grandfather—"

"Oh, forget my grandfather! Esther Townsend, I shall come here again—yes, and soon. How about next Tuesday evening? Are you free then?"

"Why—why, yes, I suppose I shall be. But, Bob—"

"All right. I'll be on hand. Good night."

When she went up to her room the door of her uncle's room was open and he called to her.

"Didn't stay very long, did he?" he observed.

"No, Uncle Foster, not very."

"Coming again pretty soon, I suppose?"

"Why—why, he said he might call Tuesday evening. Of course if you had rather he didn't—"

"I told you I hadn't any objections, provided he doesn't come too often. Asked you to drop in at the Tobias Eldridge place, I suppose?"

"Ye-es. Yes, he said something about it; but I told him I couldn't do that."

"Good girl. . . . Well, all right. Good night."

She bent over his chair back and kissed him.

"I think it is very sweet of you to let him come here at all," she said. "I—I don't see how you can—considering who he is."

"Who he is? . . . Humph! . . . Well, he is a friend of yours and I don't want to stand between you and your friends. Besides—which is what you mean, of course—he is a Cook and when I deal with one of them I always feel safer if he is where—"

He did not finish the sentence. "Where—? What were you going to say?" she asked.

He was fearful that he had already said too much. "Nothing, nothing," he said. "Good night, dearie. I must finish my letter."

The letter was to Mrs. Jane Carter, in Boston, and he did finish it before he went to bed.

Bob came on Tuesday evening and again Foster Townsend left the young people alone in the library. The stay this time was longer. He came again on Friday and on the following Tuesday. Townsend said nothing, but he thought a good deal. He began to wish that he had followed his own inclination and forbidden the pair of young idiots to see each other at all. His questions to Esther, put very guardedly, seemed to warrant the belief that, so far at least, her feeling toward Griffin was merely that of friendship; but friendship at that age was dangerous. It must be broken off—and soon.

CHAPTER X

MRS. CARTER had not yet replied to his letter. He wrote another, stating his case more succinctly and intimating that he expected compliance with his wishes. He even dropped a hint concerning her obligation to him, something he had never done before.

"It may upset your plans a little," he wrote, "and I suppose you feel that you can't shut up that house of yours and turn your other lodgers adrift. Well, I don't ask you to do that. Find some one who can handle the craft while you are away and I will pay the bill. I have heard you say that it was the dream of your life to go where I am planning to send you. Here is your dream come true. You like the girl and she likes you. You are the only one in sight that I should feel safe to trust as skipper of a cruise like this one, with her aboard. You have always declared that, if ever you could do anything for me, you would do it if it killed you. Well, this won't kill you. It may do you good. If anything can shake the reefs out of that Boston canvas of yours I should say this might be the thing. You will sail freer afterwards and you will have something to talk about besides the gilding on the State House dome. Let me hear from you right away."

He did not hear, however. Another week passed and he had not heard. Bob Griffin called twice more during that week. And on Sunday, after service, while Foster Townsend stood on the church steps chatting with Captain Ben Snow, from the corner of his eye he saw Esther and Bob talking together and noticed, quite as clearly, the significant glances and whisperings of his fellow worshipers as they, too, watched the pair.

Harniss was beginning to talk, of course. Neighbors had seen Griffin entering the yard of the mansion evening after

evening. Curious eyes had remained open later than was their custom to note the hour at which he left that yard. And they were noting that, whereas the said hour was in the beginning as early as nine-thirty, it was now ten-thirty or, on one occasion, close to eleven. "What is Cap'n Foster thinking about?" people wanted to know. "Elisha Cook's grandson coming to *that* house! Doesn't the Cap'n realize what is going on? If he don't somebody ought to tell him."

Nobody did tell him; no one would have dared. Various reasons for his permitting the visits were suggested. For the most part these reasons were connected with the lawsuit. Perhaps Griffin had quarreled with his grandfather. That might be why he had hired Tobias Eldridge's shanty and was spending his days there instead of in Denboro, where he belonged. Perhaps he and Elisha Cook had had a row and Bob had deserted to the enemy. He might be giving Townsend inside information which would help the latter and his lawyers. Perhaps Townsend had bought the boy off. He had money enough to buy anybody or anything, if he cared to use it.

Millard Fillmore Clark, as an "in-law" and a possible though but remotely possible, source of information was questioned. Mr. Clark's replies to all queries were non-committal and dignified. One gathered that he knew a great deal but was under oath to reveal nothing.

"You let us alone," he said, loftily, "We 'tend to our business and we generally know what that business is. Wait a little spell. Just wait. Then I guess you'll see what you do see."

The few who dared drop a hint to Reliance left unsatisfied. Mrs. Wheeler, who boasted that she made it a point to give her custom to the "native tradespeople" whenever possible, was one of these few. She had graciously permitted the Clark-Makepeace millinery shop to fashion for her what she called a "garden hat," and she dropped in at the room in the rear of the post office building ostensibly to see how the fashioning was progressing. After the usual preliminaries of weather, health

and church matters had been touched upon, she broached another subject.

"I hear Captain Townsend's attractive niece has developed a new talent," she observed, with a smile. "I always supposed music was her specialty. Now I understand she has taken up painting."

Reliance looked up from the garden hat, which was in her lap. Then she looked down again.

"Has she?" she asked, calmly. "I didn't know it."

Mrs. Wheeler smiled once more. "So they say," she affirmed. "She has developed a fondness for art."

"Is that so. . . . Don't you think the bow would look better on the side than right in front, Mrs. Wheeler?"

Considering how very particular—not to say fussy—the lady had hitherto been concerning that hat she seemed surprisingly indifferent to the position of the bow.

"No doubt," she said, carelessly. "Arrange it as you think best, Miss Clark. . . . Yes, Miss Townsend seems to be devoted to art at present—or, at least, to an artist. Ha, ha! I know nothing of it, of course, but I have heard such a rumor."

Abbie Makepeace, who was a little deaf although she would never admit it, put in a word.

"You can't put too much dependence on what Maria Bloomer says," she declared. "She'll say anything that comes into her head. All them Bloomers are alike that way."

Their patron regarded her coldly. "I said 'rumor,' not Bloomer," she corrected.

"Oh! Yes, yes, I see. One of Seth Payne's roomers, was it? He's got a houseful of 'em this summer, so they tell me. Why, there's a couple there from somewheres out West—Milwaukee—or Missouri, or somewheres; begins with a M, anyway. They're awful queer folks. Take their meals at Emeline Ryder's and Emeline says she never had such cranky mealers at *her* table, before nor since. Why, one day, so she says, the man—I do wish I could remember his name—found

fault with the beefsteak they had for dinner; said 'twas too tough to eat. Now, accordin' to Emeline 'twas as good top of the round steak as she could buy out of the butcher cart, and she'd pounded it with the potato masher for half an hour before she put it in the fryin' pan. She lost her patience and says she: 'Now, look here, Mr. ——'. Oh, dear, dear! What *is* that man's name? Funny I can't remember it. What is it, Reliance? Do tell me, for mercy sakes!"

Reliance could not remember, either, but she suggested various names, none of which was exactly right. Mrs. Wheeler departed in disgust before the matter was settled. Miss Makepeace commented upon the manner of her exit.

"What made her switch out that way?" she inquired, in surprise. "Acted as if she was out of sorts about somethin', seemed to me. Don't you suppose she liked the hat, Reliance?"

Reliance smiled. "It wasn't the hat that brought her here," she observed. "That woman was fishin', Abbie."

"Fishin'! What are you talkin' about? Fishin' for what?"

"For what she didn't get. She wouldn't have got it from me, anyhow, but you saved me the trouble of tellin' her so and, maybe, losin' us a customer. Do you remember that man in the Bible who wanted bread and somebody gave him a stone? Well, that Wheeler woman wanted news and what she got was a tough beefsteak. Serve her right. Much obliged to you, Abbie."

Abbie had not listened to the last part of this speech. Now she clapped her hands in satisfaction.

"There!" she exclaimed. "I've got it at last. When you said somethin' about a stone it came to me. Stone made me think of brick and brick was what I wanted. That man's name is Clay. Tut, tut! Well, I shan't forget it next time."

That evening, when Esther came down to supper, it seemed to her that her uncle was in far better humor than he had been for some time. During the past week he had been somewhat taciturn and grumpy. She suspected that matters connected with the lawsuit might not be progressing to his satisfaction,

but when she asked he brusquely told her that was all right enough, so far as it went, although it went almighty slow. Then her suspicions shifted and she began to fear that, perhaps, he did not like Bob's calling so frequently. He had never offered objections to the calls, greeted the young man pleasantly and usually left the pair together for the greater part of the evening. Nevertheless—or so she fancied—his greetings were a trifle less hearty now than they had been at first. And, on the morning following Griffin's most recent call, he said something at the breakfast table which was disturbing. She had thought of it many times since.

"Well," he observed, after the maid had left them together, "how is the great picture painter these days? Getting to be a pretty regular visitor, isn't he? Coming again Tuesday night, I suppose? Eh?"

Esther, taken by surprise, colored and hesitated.

"Why—why, I don't know, Uncle Foster," she faltered. "He didn't say he was."

"Didn't need to, perhaps. Probably thought you might take it for granted by this time. Tuesdays and Fridays on his calendar seem to be marked with your initials. Those other young chaps who used to drop in here once in a while appear to have sheered off. I wonder why."

Esther looked at him. He was smiling, so she smiled also.

"If you mean George Bartlett," she said. "He has gone back to Boston. His vacation is over. And Fred Winthrop is—well, I don't know why he doesn't come, I am sure. I don't like him, anyway."

"Perhaps he guessed as much. You do like this Griffin, I take it."

Esther had ceased to smile. "Why, yes, I do," she declared. "I told you I did. He is a nice boy and I do like him. But, Uncle Foster, I don't see why you speak this way. If you think—"

"There, there!" rather testily. "I said, in the beginning, that I wasn't going to think anything. You and I agreed that we

wouldn't have any secrets from each other, so why should I think?"

"You shouldn't. Uncle Foster, if you don't want Bob to come here—"

"Sshh! I told you he could come—if he didn't come too often."

"So you do think he is coming too often?"

"I didn't say so. I was just wondering what his grandfather might be thinking about it. He has told the old man, of course?"

He had not and Esther knew it. Bob had announced his intention of telling his grandfather of his friendship with Foster Townsend's niece, but he had put off the telling, waiting, he said, for a favorable opportunity. Townsend, keenly scrutinizing the girl's face, read his answer there.

"Well, well," he added, before she could reply. "That is his business, not yours nor mine, my dear. Only," he said, with a grim chuckle, "I shall be interested to hear how Elisha takes the news."

It was this which had troubled Esther ever since. And now Tuesday evening had arrived and, in an hour or two, unless her surmise was very wrong indeed, Bob himself would come. If he had not told Mr. Cook he must do so at once. She should insist upon it.

She thought about this during supper, but afterward, when they were together in the library, her uncle made an announcement that drove every other thought from her mind. He seated himself as usual in the big easy-chair, but he did not pick up the newspaper which lay upon the table. Instead he thrust his hands into his pockets and looked at her.

"Esther," he said, "I've got some news for you. You're going to be surprised. How long will it take you to get ready to start for Paris?"

She stared at him in utter amazement.

"To Paris!" she repeated.

"Um-hum. That is what I said. To Paris, France. How

long before you can get ready to start for there? I hope not too long, because now that it is settled you are going the sooner you get away the better."

She caught her breath. He must be joking—he must be. Yet he seemed quite sincere.

"To Paris?" she cried. "Why, Uncle Foster! What *do* you mean? Are we going to Paris—*now?*"

He shook his head. "Not quite such good luck as that," he answered, with a sigh. "I had intended that we should go together. I had promised myself that cruise with you and I had counted on it. But I can't get away for a while. My lawyers say they need me here and that I can't be spared. But there's no reason why you shouldn't go. Ever since that concert I have heard nothing but what a fine voice you've got and that it ought to be cultivated up to the top notch. Paris is the place where they do that kind of cultivating and there is where you ought to be. No use wasting time. I have been tempted to be selfish and keep you here along with me. I've thought up every excuse for keeping you, but they aren't good enough. The minute this blasted suit is tried—or settled—or put off again or something, I'll take the next ship and come to you as quick as it will take me. But you must go now. And I've got exactly the right person to go with you," he added, earnestly.

She would have spoken, have protested perhaps, but he held up his hand.

"No, wait," he commanded. "Just wait and listen. It's all planned, every bit of it."

He went on to tell of the plan. The person who was to accompany her, who was to be in charge of everything, was Mrs. Jane Carter of Boston. She was very fond of Esther and the latter was equally fond of her. She was wise and capable and refined and educated; she was everything which a companion for the finest girl in the world should be. He and she had been in correspondence for some time. Mrs. Carter was to leave her house and her lodgers in charge of a friend

and was prepared to start within two or three weeks, if necessary.

"You and she can spend the summer traveling together, if you want to," he went on. "There will be arrangements to make, and lots of things to find out about before you begin with your studies. You'll have a good time—and I'll have as good a time as I can until I can get over there with you. There! that's the plan. Pretty good one, too, I think. What do you say to it?"

She did not know what to say. The suddenness of its disclosure, the surprise, the conviction by this time forced upon her that her trip abroad was to be an actual, immediate reality and not the vaguely marvelous dream which had been in her mind for so long, were too overwhelming to permit her to think at all, much less speak or reason.

In the endeavor to answer, to say something, she turned toward him and caught him off his guard. He was regarding her with a look of love and longing, which touched her to the core. It vanished as he saw her look and he smiled again, but she sprang from the rocker and, running to his side, put her arms about his neck and pressed her cheek to his.

"Oh, no, Uncle Foster!" she cried. "No, I can't do it. It is wonderful of you to plan such a thing for me. It is just like you. You are—oh, you are— But I can't go. It would be too selfish. I can't go and leave you—all alone, here at home. It wouldn't be right at all. No, I'll wait until we can go together."

He took her hand in his and held it tight. "Oh, yes, you will, dearie," he declared. "You'll go because I want you to. I'll be lonesome without you. Good Lord, yes! I'll be lonesome, but I can stand it for a while. You'll go. I want you to go. It is all settled—Eh? Confound it! there's the bell. Who is coming here to-night? I don't want to see anybody."

She, too, had heard the bell and she knew who had rung it. She had forgotten, but now she remembered. She withdrew her hand from her uncle's grasp:

"It is—I suppose it is—" she began; and then added, impulsively: "Oh, I wish he hadn't come!"

Foster Townsend looked up at her.

"Eh?" he queried. "Oh, yes, yes! I forgot. Tuesday night, isn't it. Well, all right; you and I can finish our talk to-morrow just as well. . . . Here! Where are you going?"

She was on her way to the door.

"I am going to tell him I can't see him to-night," she said.

"No, no! Don't do any such thing. Of course you'll see him. You've got some news for him, too. He'll be surprised, of course—and delighted, maybe."

There was an odd significance in the tone of this last speech which caused her to turn quickly and look at him. At that moment Bob's voice was heard in the hall and, an instant later, he entered the library. One glance at the pair made him aware that he had interrupted a scene of some kind. Esther's eyes were wet and her manner oddly excited. Her "good evening" was almost perfunctory and she kept looking at her uncle instead of at him. Foster Townsend, also, seemed a little queer. His handshake was as off-hand as usual; Bob never considered it more than a meaningless condescension to the formalities. That there was behind it any real cordiality he doubted. Esther's uncle could scarcely be expected to love him; that was natural enough, considering whose grandson he was. And there was an occasional tartness or sarcasm in the Townsend speech and a look or two in his direction from the Townsend eyes, which confirmed his suspicion that, although Captain Foster, for some reason, permitted him to call at the mansion, he was far from overjoyed to see him there.

To-night—or perhaps he imagined it—the sarcasm was even more in evidence.

"Hello, Griffin!" said the captain. "How are you?"

Bob thanked him and said that he was well.

"That's good. Painted any more pictures to give away, lately?"

Bob smilingly shook his head.

"Not yet," he said.

"That so? Haven't sold any either, I suppose?"

"No, sir."

"Humph! Kind of dull times in the trade, I should say. Take you a good while to make a million at that rate, won't it?"

"I'm afraid so. But I shall be satisfied with a good deal less than a million."

"So? You aren't as grasping as some of your family, then."

Bob thought it time to change the subject. He turned to the other member of the trio.

"How are you, Esther?" he asked. "Any news since I saw you?"

Esther absently replied that there was no news. Her uncle laughed.

"She doesn't mean that, Griffin," he declared. "There is some news, big news. We were just talking about it when you came in. Weren't we, Esther?"

"Why—why yes, Uncle Foster, we were."

"Yes, we were. Well, I'll leave you to tell it. Good night."

He turned toward the hall door. She had not forgotten the look she had seen upon his face that instant when the smiling mask had fallen. It had shown her a little of his real feeling, something of what the sacrifice of her companionship meant to him. She had never loved him as she loved him now.

"Oh, don't go away, Uncle Foster," she begged. "You're not going to bed so soon. Stay here with us. We want you to. Don't we, Bob?"

"Certainly, of course," agreed Bob. Townsend shook his head.

"Can't," he declared, cheerfully. "I've got another letter to write Jane Carter and I want it to go in the morning mail. Good night, Esther. Good night, Griffin."

He went out and the door closed. Esther remained standing, looking after him. Bob grinned. Then he drew a long breath.

"Whew!" he exclaimed, in evident relief. "That storm blew

over quicker than I thought it would. The way he lit into me when I first came—and the queer way you both looked and acted when I walked into this room—made me wonder what had happened. What *is* up, Esther?"

She did not answer. His grin became a laugh.

"Did you hear him give me that dig about painting pictures to give away?" he asked. "And that other one about not being grasping as some one else in the family? That was a whack at grandfather and the lawsuit, of course. I thought I might be in for a row, but he was pleasant enough when he said good night. I wonder—"

She surprised him then.

"Oh, don't!" she broke in, impatiently. "Don't! He is the best, the kindest man in the whole world. Don't you dare say he isn't."

He looked at her in astonishment. Then he whistled.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed. "Don't take my head off. I didn't say he wasn't good and kind and all that. I think he is. I rather like him, as a matter of fact; even if he doesn't like me."

She turned upon him. "Now why do you say that?" she demanded. "If he doesn't like you why does he let you come here—to this house? You haven't any reason to say he doesn't like you."

"Maybe not. Perhaps he does like me. I hope he does. I want him to. As for his letting me come here to see you, I must say it's mighty decent of him. I doubt if I should, if I were in his place—considering who I am. Come, Esther, don't pitch into me this way. What have I done?"

She smiled then. "Oh, you haven't done anything, Bob," she said. "I am just—oh, excited and upset, that's all. Uncle Foster has just told me the most wonderful thing. He is going to let me do what I have wanted to do for years and—and I ought to be very happy. I think I should be if it weren't that I know how terribly lonely he is going to be without me."

"Without you! What do you mean by that? Are you

going somewhere? Is this the big news he was hinting at? Why, Esther! You aren't going away, are you?"

She sat in the rocker. He was regarding her anxiously. She nodded.

"Yes, Bob," she said, gravely. "I am. I am going abroad to study. I didn't know a word about it until a few minutes ago. Uncle has planned it all. I am going with Mrs. Carter and—"

He interrupted. "What!" he cried. "You are going abroad? . . . When?"

"I don't know exactly. But very soon."

"How long are you going to stay there?"

"I don't know that, either. A year at least, I suppose. Perhaps longer."

"Indeed you are not!"

"Why, Bob Griffin! What do you mean?"

"I mean—well, never mind now. I guess I don't know what I mean. Or, if I do, it can wait. Tell me all about it. Tell me!"

So she told him, told as much of the plan as her uncle had told her. He listened without speaking. At the end she said: "If I weren't for leaving him I should be so wildly happy I shouldn't know what to do. But, oh, Bob, I know what letting me go means to him. And he had planned to go with me. He and I have talked ever so many times about going to Paris together. Now he can't go. That miserable suit and the horrid lawyers are keeping him here. But because he thinks I ought to go he is sending me and not thinking of himself at all. He will be perfectly wretched without me. I know it. I almost feel like saying that I won't go until he does. Perhaps I ought to say it—and stick to it. What do you think?"

He did not reply, nor did he look at her. She bent forward to look at him.

"Why, Bob!" she cried. "What is the matter?"

He shook his head. "I wonder if you think your uncle is

going to be the only wretched person in this neighborhood?" he muttered. "Do you think that?"

"Why—why, I suppose Aunt Reliance will miss me."

He looked up then. "How about me?" he asked.

"You! You? . . . Why—why, Bob, I don't believe I thought of you."

"I don't believe you did. I am afraid you didn't. But do you imagine I shall be—well, altogether joyful?"

She could not answer. For, all at once, she *was* thinking of him. It seemed strange that she had not done it before. She had not realized that her glorious trip meant the end of their companionship. If not the end, then at least a year of separation. And suddenly, with the realization, came a new feeling—a rush of feelings. She gasped.

"Why—why, Bob—" she faltered.

He had risen and was standing beside her, bending over her.

"Esther," he pleaded, desperately, "do you suppose I shan't be completely miserable if you go away and leave me? Why—why, you know it! You must know it! What do you suppose my knowing you and—and being with you, like this, means to me? Esther, doesn't it mean anything to you—anything at all?"

She was beginning to comprehend what it did mean. But she knew she must not think it. It was impossible—it was insane—it was—

"Oh, don't, Bob! Don't!" she begged. "You—you mustn't—"

"I must. I've got to. It may be my only chance. Esther, don't you care anything about me? I thought—I was beginning to hope—Oh, Esther, you are the only girl in the world for me. I love you."

"Bob! Bob! Don't!"

"I do. I love you. Say you love me! Say it! Say it!"

She had risen to her feet. Some wild idea of escape—of running from the room—was in her mind. But his arms were about her.

"Say it! Say it, dear!" he pleaded.

"No, no! I mustn't! You mustn't—"

"You do love me? You do, don't you, Esther?"

"Oh, I don't know! I— Oh, of course I don't! I mustn't! Let me go."

"No, I shan't let you go until you tell me. You do care for me, dear? Tell me you do."

"No, Bob. . . . Oh, please let me go!"

She was crying. He released her and stepped back from the chair. For an instant he stood there and then, lifting his hands and letting them fall again in surrender, turned away.

"Oh, well!" he sighed, miserably. "Well—there! I see how it is. I was a fool, of course. I ought to have known. I am sorry, Esther. Forgive me, if you can."

She had sunk down into the rocker once more and was sobbing, her face buried in the cushion upon its back. He spoke again.

"I hope you can forgive me," he begged. "I didn't mean to say those things to you—yet. Some day of course, after you had known me longer—and—but I had no idea of saying them now. It was your telling me you were going away—for years—and leaving me— Well, it drove me crazy, that's all. I am sorry. Of course I don't blame you in the least. There is no reason why you should care for me—and plenty why you shouldn't, I suppose. I don't amount to much, I guess. Don't cry any more. I am awfully sorry I hurt your feelings."

The head pressed against the cushion moved back and forth.

"You haven't hurt them," she murmured, chokingly. "I don't know why I am crying. I—I won't any more."

She sat up, fumbled for her handkerchief, and hurriedly wiped her eyes.

"Then you do forgive me?" he urged.

"There was nothing to forgive. . . . No," earnestly. "No, Bob, you mustn't. Please dont! . . . I—I think you had better go now."

He took a step toward the door. Then he paused and turned.

"Then it is all over, I suppose?" he said. "You don't care for me at all?"

Her lips opened to form the No which she knew must be said, which she had determined to say. But when her eyes met his the resolution faltered—broke.

"Don't ask me, Bob, please!" she begged, in desperation. "I—I— Oh, even if I did, what difference would it make? It is perfectly impossible—you and I— You *know* it is!"

He was at her side again and this time he would not be denied. He held her close and kissed her. Then he stepped back and laughed aloud.

"That is all I wanted to know," he cried, in triumph. "You do care. That is enough. That is all that matters. Now let's see them keep us apart! You are mine—and you are going to be mine, always, forever and ever, amen. Ha! *Now* let them try to stop it!"

She regarded him in wonder.

"You can laugh!" she exclaimed, reproachfully.

"You bet I can laugh! I was beginning to think I never should laugh again, but now— Ha! They may send you to Paris or to Jericho, it doesn't make any difference now, Esther—"

But she held out her hands imploringly.

"Please go now, Bob," she urged. "I must think this all over, before—before we talk any more. I must. It is—oh, it is all as crazy as can be and I must think it over by myself. . . . You will go now, won't you, for my sake?"

He hesitated. Then he nodded.

"Certainly I will, if you want me to," he said. "But no matter how much you think it doesn't change the fact that we love each other and belong to each other. That is settled. . . . Good night, dearest. I'll see you Friday evening, of course. And then we can talk, can't we."

She shook her head. "I don't know," she replied. "I don't know what I may have decided by that time. I am not sure

that I am doing right in letting you come on Friday—or any more at all. I am not sure of anything."

"I am. And I shall be thinking, too. This Paris business—well, I may have something to say about that. I have an idea of my own—or a part of one. It has just this minute come to me. I'll tell you about it then. Good night."

When Esther tiptoed up the stairs to her room she devoutly hoped that her uncle's door might be closed. She simply could not face him, or speak with him. She dreaded those keen eyes of his. The door was open, however, and he called to her.

"What!" he cried. "That young fellow gone so early? He's been standing longer watches than this lately. What's the matter? Anything happened?"

She did not pause and she tried hard to make her tone casual.

"Oh, no," she answered. "Nothing has happened. Good night, Uncle dear."

He chuckled to himself. In spite of her care there had been a tremor in her voice. He guessed the reason, or thought he did. She had told Griffin of the European trip and he—and perhaps she—had come to realize that it meant the end of their association. Well, that is exactly what he intended it to mean. No doubt they both regretted the parting. Never mind. Esther would soon get over it. Better a trifling heartache now than a big one later on. She should not marry Elisha Cook's grandson if he were the only man on earth. His own heartache at the thought of losing her for a time was soothed by the certainty that once more he was having his own way.

CHAPTER XI

ESTHER'S hours of sleep that night were few indeed. She was happy one moment and miserable the next. Bob loved her—he told her so. And she loved him, she was sure of it now. But did they love each other enough? Were they sufficiently certain of that love to go on to face its inevitable consequences, regardless of what those consequences must mean to themselves and to others? For if they were not, both of them, absolutely sure, those consequences were too tremendous to be faced. Her uncle had permitted friendship between Elisha Cook's grandson and herself—the fact of his doing so was still an unexplainable mystery to her—but she was certain that he would never consent to their marriage. And Bob's grandfather would be equally resolute in his opposition. It was one thing to say, as Bob had said, that the family feud had no part in their lives. It had. She loved her uncle dearly and she knew that he idolized her. She owed him a debt of gratitude beyond the limits of measure. Only one reason could ever be strong enough to warrant her risking the end of their affectionate association and the repudiation of that debt. If she were certain that she loved Bob Griffin—really loved him and would always love him—then nothing else mattered. Except, of course, the same certainty of his enduring love for her. But were they certain? They had known each other such a short time.

And there were other considerations. Her future with her beloved music, the career she had dreamed. She had no money of her own. Bob had some, but not a great deal. He was almost as dependent upon his grandfather as she was upon Foster Townsend. Might not his chances for fame and success as an artist be wrecked if he married her? She must think of that, too. There was so much to think of. She thought and

thought, but morning brought no definite conclusion except one, which was that she must continue to think and, meanwhile, there must be no plighted troth, no engagement, no definite promise of any kind between them. She would tell Bob that when they next met. If he really loved her he would understand and be willing to wait, as she would wait, and see.

She came downstairs early and found that her uncle was an even earlier riser. He had gone out to the stable, so Nabby said, but would, of course, come in to breakfast when called. And he had already told Mrs. Gifford of Esther's coming trip abroad. Nabby was excited and even more voluble than usual.

"I suspicioned there was somethin' up," she declared. "He's been nervous and uneasy for over a fortni't. And cranky—my soul! He was like a dog with one flea, you never could tell the place he'd snap at next. Varunas noticed it too, of course, and he was consider'ble worried about it. Honest, I cal'late Varunas was beginnin' to be afraid that your uncle was losin' his mind or somethin'. 'He's touched in the head, I do believe,' he said. 'If he ain't why does he allow that grandson of 'Lisha Cook's to come here so twice a week reg'lar? A Cook don't belong in this house and you know it, Nabby. What is he let come here for?'

"Well, I didn't know why, of course, but I never see Foster Townsend yet when he didn't have a reason for doin' things and I spoke right up and said so. 'When Cap'n Foster gets ready to put that Griffin boy out he'll do it,' I told him. 'You say yourself the cap'n don't act natural these days. Well, maybe there's the reason. Probably he don't really like that young feller's ringin' our front doorbell any better than you do, and he's just waitin' for a good excuse to tell him so.' That's what I said, but I wan't so terrible satisfied with *what* I said and Varunas he was less satisfied than I was.

" 'Hugh!' says he, disgusted. 'When I see Foster Townsend waitin' for an excuse to do what he wants to, then I won't guess he's gone crazy, I'll *know* it. When he sets out to tell the President of the United States, or the minister, or

Judas Iscariot, or anybody else, to go to Tophet he tells 'em so and then thinks up the excuse afterwards. You bet he ain't actin' natural! Nabby Gifford, if Foster Townsend don't need a doctor, or a keeper or somethin', then I do. This kind of goin's on is too much for *me!*"

Having contributed this conversational gem from the Gifford family treasury, Nabby paused. Possibly she expected Esther to offer some explanation of the Griffin visits. If so she was disappointed, for Esther said nothing. Nabby picked up a fork from the breakfast table and then put it down again.

"Well, anyhow," she continued, "be that as it will or must, as the sayin' is, your uncle has acted queer for quite a spell and 'twan't until this very mornin' that he give me the least hint of why he was doin' it. When he told me no longer than twenty minutes ago, that he had been layin' his plans for you to go over to live along with them—er—heathen in foreign lands—when he told me you was goin' and he was goin' to stay here to home alone—I got my answer, or part of it anyhow. The poor soul is about crazy with lonesomeness at the very idea. That's what ails him. Are you really truly goin' to go, Esther?"

Esther nodded. "Uncle says I must," she replied. "He wants me to go on with my singing and my music and he can't go himself—at present."

She went on to tell of the proposed trip, of Mrs. Carter, and the details as she had been told them by Townsend.

"Goodness knows I don't want to leave him," she said, "but he insists that I must. He has arranged for everything. I tried to say No, but he won't listen. He will have his own way, as he always does, I suppose. I know how lonesome he will be. I shall be almost as lonely without him," she added.

Nabby seemed to be thinking. There was an odd expression upon her face.

"You don't suppose—" she began, and stopped in the middle of the sentence.

"I don't suppose what?" Esther asked.

"Oh, nothin'! It's silly, I guess. I just wondered—it come across my mind—if it might be he was sendin' you off so's to get you away from—well, from this Bob Griffin. . . . Humph! No, 'tain't likely he'd do that, because—"

Esther broke in. Her face was flushed and her tone indignantly resentful.

"The idea!" she cried. "What do you mean by saying such a thing, Nabby Gifford? How ridiculous! What has Bob Griffin got to do with my going abroad? Uncle and I had planned to go together; we have talked about it ever so many times. What on earth are you talking about?"

Mrs. Gifford hastily protested that she had not meant anything.

"'Twas just a foolish notion, I know," she admitted. "Don't know why I said it, I don't. Of course if Cap'n Foster wanted to get clear of that Cook boy he'd have told him his room was a whole lot better 'n his company. He don't *have* to let him come here."

"Oh, stop! Why shouldn't he come here? He hasn't anything to do with the old lawsuit. Yes, and so far as that goes, Uncle Foster asked him to call."

Nabby stared. For an instant her mouth, which had opened to speak, closed and remained so. Varunas had vowed, during one of their domestic conferences, that he would give something for a tintype of her in that condition. "Only 'twould be so mirac'lous nobody 'd believe 'twas you," he had added.

The miraculous condition lasted but the fraction of a second. The mouth opened again.

"What!" gasped Nabby. "Do you mean to tell me that Cap'n Foster *asked* that Griffin one to come to this house—really asked him?"

Esther hesitated. She had spoken too hastily. And what she had said was not the exact truth. Her uncle had not invited Bob to call; he had merely prophesied that he would call. But at all events he had not forbidden him to do so.

"Oh, never mind!" she said, turning impatiently away.

"What difference does it make? . . . Here is Uncle now, thank goodness!"

He came into the dining room, smilingly bade her good-morning, and they sat down to breakfast. She was apprehensive. They had agreed that neither should keep a secret from the other, but, in spite of this agreement, she was certain that this secret—hers and Bob's—must be kept, at least until she was sure what her final answer to Bob should be. When her mind was fully made up, either one way or the other, she would tell him, but meanwhile it was far better for all concerned to say nothing. So she tried her best to appear at ease and, while pouring the coffee, commented upon the weather and similar safe and everyday topics. His replies were equally casual. Nevertheless she was still fearful. It seemed to her that those sharp eyes of his must see through her pretense.

Apparently they did not. He spoke of the Paris trip, of course. She was to sail in a few weeks. He had written another letter to Mrs. Carter and bade the latter make preparations to leave as soon as possible. "Not that I'm in a hurry to get rid of you," he added, with a rueful smile. "I guess you know it isn't that. But I am something like Sarah Bigsby, after she lost her husband. She told Colton, the minister, that she didn't know but she wished Isaac had died sooner, because if he had she would have had more time to get used to missing him in."

It was not until they were about to rise from the table that he mentioned the subject she most dreaded.

"Humph!" he observed, folding his napkin. "Well, young Griffin was as surprised when you told him the news as we thought he would be, eh?"

Esther was thankful that her own napkin required folding. She could look at that and not at him.

"Yes, Uncle Foster," she answered. "He was very much surprised."

"I'll bet! And glad to have you go, of course?"

She pretended not to notice the irony in the question.

"Why, he was glad I was to have such a wonderful trip and the opportunity to keep on with my music," she replied.

"Um-hum. I'm sure of that. Coming around Friday night, as usual, is he?"

"I—I don't know. . . . Why, yes, I do know, too. He said he should come, so I suppose he will."

The statement seemed, for some reason, to irritate him. He thrust the folded napkin into the ornate and massive silver ring —it had been a birthday gift from his wife—and rose to his feet.

"Humph!" he growled. "I'll bet! If he 'tends church as regular as he does here he'll stand a better chance for heaven than any of his crew I ever heard of. . . . There, there!" he added, his ill-humor vanishing as quickly as it came. "Don't mind my crankiness. I am liable to be that way for a while. Every time I think of sitting down to breakfast here without you I want to bite somebody. For the first few mornings after you leave I guess likely 'twill be better to have Nabby wait on table, instead of the other girl. Nabby would be moderately safe. I don't imagine I should bite her; she's too old and stringy to tempt my appetite."

He mentioned Bob's name but once more that morning. Then he asked a question he had asked before.

"Has he told his grandfather yet about how sociable and friendly he has got to be with us?" he inquired. "No? . . . Humph! Saving the news for the old man's birthday, maybe, the way you and he saved up that picture for mine. Well, many happy returns, Elisha. Ho, ho!"

Esther made no comment. The speech, however, strengthened her conviction concerning her uncle's real feeling toward Bob. If he knew—or when he knew. . . . She shuddered at the thought and endeavored to put it from her mind. Meanwhile she tried her best to show by every word and act her devotion and love for Foster Townsend. She and her uncle were closer during this period than ever before. Later she was to be very thankful that this was so.

Bob came on Friday evening at the usual hour, and, also as usual, soon after his arrival Townsend went to his own room. His keen dislike for any member of what he contemptuously called the "Cook tribe" was now, in Griffin's case, augmented by a bitter jealousy. Yet he could not bring himself to remain there and stand guard upon them. He had told Esther he trusted her. Well, he would carry the trust to the limit, and, thank heaven, that limit was close at hand. Foster Townsend prided himself upon never having, in trade or politics or horse racing, played the sneak. He would beat his competitor by what he considered fair means—that is, by craft or shrewdness or even force—but not by sneaking or spying. To remain in that room during Bob Griffin's visits seemed to him just that, and he would not stoop to it.

Esther, for her part, was always conscious of the trust which her uncle placed in her. It was noble of him, she thought. And this particular evening, as he left the room and she turned to face her lover, the consciousness strengthened her determination to say what must be said. That it would be hard to say she knew. But when they were alone and Bob came toward her, his hands outstretched and his face alight, it was harder than she had dreamed.

He would have taken her in his arms, but she avoided the embrace.

"No, Bob, no!" she protested. "You mustn't. Please don't!"

He persisted, of course, but she was firm.

"You mustn't," she repeated. "It isn't right."

He laughed. "Right!" he exclaimed. "Why, of course, it is right. I have been waiting for it—forever, it seems to me. Nothing else *is* right. Come, Esther!"

Still she avoided him. "No, Bob," she insisted, "it isn't right. It is wrong—now, at least. Oh, don't make it so hard for me! Sit down, please. I have so much to say to you."

He hesitated. Then, with a shrug and a smile, he threw himself into the easy-chair.

"Well," he observed, still smiling. "I don't know what this is all about, but here I am. I am going to listen because you ask me to, but nothing you may say will make the slightest difference between you and me. I tell you that in the beginning."

"Oh, yes, it will! It must."

"But it won't. When you told me you loved me—"

"But I didn't! I didn't!"

"Yes, you did. At any rate, you couldn't say you didn't love me and that amounted to the same thing. . . . Oh, my dear, what is the use of pretending? You know we love each other. Nothing else matters but that."

"Yes, something else does matter. It must matter. Oh, Bob, *please* be reasonable and help me, instead of making it harder. Even if I do care—even if we both care—"

"And we do . . . now, don't we?"

"Oh, please! Don't you *see?* There is so much to be thought of. I have been thinking every minute since—since you went away. Bob, haven't you thought at *all?*"

He shook his head. "I have been thinking of just one thing," he declared. "The essential thing. That is enough for me."

"It isn't enough. It can't be. How can we be so selfish? When I think of Uncle Foster and of your grandfather and what this would mean to them, and to me, if they knew it—"

"Esther!"

"Bob—*do* think a little! If you and I were to—to—well, to tell them we were engaged, that we dreamed of such a thing, they would— I don't know what they might do. They hate each other. Uncle loves me dearly, but he never, never would be reconciled to my marrying you. He would turn me out of his house, I know, and—"

Bob interrupted. "Esther, *dear!*" he protested. "What are you talking about? People don't turn their relations out of doors into the snow nowadays, except on the stage. Captain Townsend would be mad at first, perhaps; although if he does worship you, as you say, I can't think he would be mad long.

Naturally, *if* he loved you, he would want you to do what would make you happiest. But, mad or not, he wouldn't turn you out. That is foolish."

"No, it isn't. And I am sure your grandfather would have nothing more to do with you. They aren't like other people. This lawsuit has—well, it has made them almost crazy—in that way."

Her earnestness had its effect. Bob's lip tightened. "Well, then," he said, grudgingly, "suppose they did—turn us out, as you say? Probably they wouldn't, but if they did—what of it? We would have each other. I have a little money and I could earn more. Look here, Esther; if you care as much for me as I do for you you won't mind being poor. That won't count at all. We'll be together and—well, give me the chance and I swear you shan't be poor long. . . . Of course, if you *don't* care for me as much as that—if what you think about is money, why—"

"Bob! Bob, how can you! If money were all—yes, and if I, myself, were all, I should— No, I don't even know that. I must be very, very certain before I even consider what I might do."

"Certain! Certain of what? Do you mean that you don't know whether you love me or not? . . . Esther!"

He was very appealing as he leaned forward in the chair, his eyes fixed upon hers. But she fought against the appeal as she had determined to fight.

"Why—why, yes, Bob," she said, "perhaps I mean just that. I like you very much. Perhaps I may even—"

"Esther, dearest—"

"No. There must not be any 'perhaps.' There can't be if you and I are to give up everything—and everybody—and think only of ourselves. And then—if I were absolutely sure I loved you enough to do that—I should—yes, then more than ever, I should have to think of you. If I came to be the cause of spoiling your life, your success with your painting and all that, I should never forgive myself."

"Nonsense! You spoil my life! You! Why, you will be the one who will make me sure to succeed. With you to work for, and to help me, I can do anything. Just give me the chance to prove it. . . . But there! I guess I see how it is. You don't love me, after all."

"You mustn't say that. Bob, you said just now that if Uncle Foster really cared for me he would want to do what would make me happiest. If you really care, as you say you do, you, too, will want me to be happy. How can I be, knowing that what I am doing is sure to make my uncle and your grandfather miserable, and might, unless we were both very sure, make you and me miserable later on? I can't. You mustn't ask me to."

He leaned back in the chair. For a moment he looked at her. Then he rose to his feet.

"Yes," he said, gloomily. "I see. You *have* thought it over, haven't you? . . . Well, all right. If the idea of marrying me makes you miserable I should be the last to coax you into doing it. You are right there, I guess. . . . Well, good-by."

She, too, rose.

"No," she said, hurriedly. "No, Bob, it isn't good-by. That is, unless you want it to be."

"What is it, then?"

"It is just—just wait. Wait and see. We needn't—no, we mustn't—consider ourselves engaged. We mustn't even talk about that yet awhile between ourselves. If you are willing for us to go on as friends, good friends, and wait until—until we both *know* the right thing to do, then—well, I should like that very much indeed. That *would* make me happy."

He turned and caught her hand.

"Esther," he pleaded, earnestly, "before I answer that will you answer one question of mine, just one? You say you aren't sure you love me?"

"I said I was not sure I loved you enough to warrant the sacrifice both of us would have to make."

"I see. Well, just one more. Are you sure you don't love me at all?"

"No, Bob."

"You just want us to keep on being friends and wait until you are sure?"

"Until I am sure one way or the other. Yes."

"All right. I will wait until we are both a hundred years old and have our wedding in the home for aged couples, if that's necessary. The waiting will end in just one way, because that is the way it has got to end. You are worth waiting for, and I'll be game. It's a bargain. . . . And now what?"

"Why, now sit down and we'll talk about other things, just as we always have."

Which was easy to say, but hard to do. They tried to confine the conversation to the safe channels of everyday travel, but those channels were tremendously dull and uninteresting. Esther told the little more she had learned of her uncle's plan for her European trip and Bob listened absently. It seemed to her—and in spite of her good resolutions she felt a pang of disappointment—that he was surprisingly resigned to the parting and long separation. Instead of groaning when she told him she might remain abroad for even two years instead of one, he smiled and agreed that one year's study was not sufficient to complete her musical education. It was not until he had risen to go that he gave the reason for his complacency.

"I haven't told you that you weren't the only one who had a plan, have I?" he asked, with a twinkle. "I should have told it at first if you hadn't washed everything else out of my head with that bucket of cold water about not being sure that you cared a continental for me. I've had a surprise up my sleeve for you all the evening. I am going to Paris, myself."

She gasped. "Bob Griffin!" she cried. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that I can't have you climbing up to be a prima donna while I stay here and keep on daubing at two-for-a-cent pictures. No, I'll be studying to be a Rembrandt. And in the

same city. I sail for Paris about as soon as you do. If I dared it would be on the same ship. . . . Hold on! Let me tell you about it."

It was the idea he had already mentioned, that which had come to him just before their parting on Tuesday evening. The money he had inherited was sufficient to pay his expenses. He had always intended using it for some such purpose.

"Of course," he added, with a rather rueful grin, "there was a time, a little while ago, when I began to hope I—well, you and I—might use some of that money in other ways; but when you said you were going abroad, to leave me biting my brush ends on this side of the pond, I saw a new light. I told grandfather and, of course, there was a rumpus. He gave in, finally, as he usually does, because he is a good old sport and also, I guess, because he saw fighting was no use in this case. I am going, and going pretty soon. I'll be in Paris when you are and as long as you are; be there waiting for you to make up your mind concerning that matter we mustn't talk about. We'll be there together, and waiting together. . . . Now what do you think of that?"

She did not know what to think, still less what to say. And she could not trust herself to say much of anything at the moment. She was conscious of a thrill, a dangerous thrill, of delight. They were not to be separated, after all. He was to be near her during her exile, she would see him often, perhaps almost as often as now. Why—

And, as they stood there in the doorway of the hall, the clock in that hall chimed eleven.

"Well, what *do* you think?" he repeated. She shook her head.

"I can't think at all—now," she confessed. "I— Well, you have taken my breath away. Are you sure— But I mustn't talk about it to-night. It is eleven o'clock and you must go. The next time I see you you will tell me all about it, of course."

"Of course. And that will be Tuesday evening, or sooner. But tell me this: Aren't you glad?"

"Of course I am glad. You know I am. . . Good night."

He lingered for an instant. This was not the sort of "good-night" he had counted upon when he came. But it was a part of the bargain. He had sworn to be "game."

"Good night, Esther," he said, and walked down the path.

CHAPTER XII

WHEN Esther entered the dining room next morning she found her uncle already seated at the breakfast table reading a letter. The remainder of the mail brought up from the post office by Varunas lay beside his plate unopened. The letter seemed to be interesting, for although he looked up to bid her good morning, he returned to the reading immediately. When he reached the foot of the last page he muttered an exclamation; shook his head, and, turning back to the beginning, read the letter through once more.

"What is it, Uncle Foster?" she asked, after a moment. "Anything important?"

He nodded, absently. "Eh?" he queried. "Important? . . . Why, yes, I guess so—maybe."

"It isn't bad news? Nothing has gone wrong with the lawsuit?"

"Eh? No, no. Nothing to do with that. It is. . . . Humph! I'll tell you about it while we eat. How are you feeling this morning? All shipshape and ready for the day's run, eh?"

"Yes. I am feeling very well, thank you."

Something in her tone caused him to glance up quickly. He gave her an appraising look.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Why, yes, you do seem to be pretty well up to the top notch, that's a fact. I haven't seen as much color in your cheeks or snap in your eye for more than a week. What has done it? Been dreaming about singing to all those good-looking Frenchmen, have you?"

She laughed. She was in good spirits, wonderfully so. The color he had mentioned deepened under his gaze.

"Oh, no!" she replied, lightly. "Not exactly that."

"Must be something. Did you and that Griffin have an especially nice evening?"

This was perilously near the truth. A part of the evening he mentioned had been anything but pleasant, but for hours before falling asleep she had been thinking of Bob's great news and what it would mean to both of them. Paris alone—or with only Mrs. Carter—had not been too alluring, in spite of its glorious fulfillment of her hope. But Paris with Bob—or at least with Bob not too far away—that was different.

She laughed again, to cover her confusion. She would tell him what Bob intended doing, she had made up her mind to tell him, but before she could speak the maid came in with the breakfast and while she was there telling was, of course, impossible.

And as soon as the maid had gone Foster Townsend began speaking of another subject, that of the letter he had been reading. He picked up the closely written sheets and tapped their edges upon the table.

"Funny how things come around," he observed, rubbing his beard with his free hand. "Yes, it is *so!* I read once in a story-book—I don't read many, haven't got time to waste on yarns that a man makes up out of his head, but I do read once in a while one—I remember reading how a fellow found a letter his mother, or his best girl or somebody, had written years and years before, and when he read it this time the book said it came to him like a voice out of the past. . . . Humph! A voice out of the past. That's a pretty good way to put it, seems to me. And that's about what this letter here is," rapping the table with the papers in his hand. "Here's a man I used to know twenty—no, nearer thirty years ago. He did me a big favor then. He lent me money to go on with a deal that started me up the ladder. I didn't have a cent scarcely. He was only a few years older, but well-off already, and not a relation or anything, not even a friend, at least I hadn't counted him that. He let me have the money because he said he believed I had the right stuff in me, and he wouldn't have

charged me a penny interest if I hadn't made him. I swore then if ever I got the chance to do him a good turn I'd do it no matter what it was. And now—when for all I knew he might be dead with the grass growing over him—here he is writing me to do that good turn. Humph! A voice from the past. Yes, sir! that is what it is. Queer enough!"

Esther was interested. For the moment she forgot Paris—even Bob Griffin and Paris.

"Who is he, Uncle Foster?" she asked.

"Eh? Oh, he's a man named Covell—Seymour Covell. When I knew him he was head of a meat and provision firm on Commercial Street in Boston. Used to take contracts to fit out ships and all that. Later on he went out to Chicago and got in on the ground floor with a crowd that were killing hogs and beef cattle on a big scale. He is with 'em yet, judging from this letter, commodore of the fleet or something like that."

"And he writes to you for *money?*"

Townsend laughed aloud. "Money!" he repeated. "He must be a millionaire a dozen times over. No, no! he doesn't want money. He wants me to help him with his son, a young fellow in the twenties. Had a kind of hard time with him, I guess. Here, you read yourself what he says. It will save time. Read it out loud."

He handed her the letter. It was a long one and she read it through, aloud, as requested. It began by calling the writer to Foster Townsend's memory, speaking of old acquaintanceship and the like. Seymour Covell, it appeared, was a widower with one child, a son, now twenty-seven years of age. The requested favor had to do with the latter.

"I have had a devil of a time with him," Covell had written. "He and I don't seem to pull well together, for some reason or other. Maybe it is partly my fault, I don't know. While his mother lived she spoiled him, I guess, and I probably did my share. I don't think he is bad; naturally I wouldn't. He has had the best of everything I could buy for him, expensive

preparatory school—he was fired from one but he graduated from another—college, although he did not finish that. He thought he wanted to be an artist, paint pictures, you know."

"Like old 'Lisha's grandson," broke in Townsend, with a sardonic chuckle. "Regular disease, that seems to be. Go ahead, Esther."

His niece continued her reading. "'So,' she read, 'I sent him to Paris, where they teach that sort of thing. He learned a lot over there, but not altogether about pictures. Then he studied in New York. He paints some, when he feels like it, but he hasn't sold anything yet. For the past six months he has been here at home in Chicago, and that isn't doing him any good. He isn't too well, but he isn't sick either. I am about at my wit's end and I have thought of you, Townsend. When I knew you you were a real man and, from what I have taken pains to find out about you lately, I judge you have reached the position I expected you to reach. I wonder if you can't find something for Seymour to do. Yes, he is named after me; his mother started in to handicap him at the very beginning, you see. I wonder if you couldn't get him some sort of a job—never mind what or what it pays—in your part of the country. Something that would keep him out of doors a part of the time and build him up, and, more than all, get him away from the hothouse crowd he is traveling with. If you could it would be worth more money than I have got—to him and to me. I don't care much what it is, not at first. Get him out of the city and away from city tricks and manners. If you cared to let him come and visit you a week or two in the beginning, so that you might look him over and size him up, that, I should think, would be a good idea. Under a man like you, a driver, and as good a judge of men and the best handler of men I ever knew, we might make something of him yet. God knows I want him to be worth while. What do you think? Give me your advice, at least.'"

There was more, but not much. The letter was written upon paper bearing the name of one of the largest packing-

houses in the country and was signed, "Your old-time friend, Seymour T. Covell."

Esther, having finished her reading, looked at her uncle. He was, apparently, thinking deeply, pulling at his beard, his brows drawn together.

"How strange that he should write like this—to you," she said. "About his personal affairs, and his own son. Did you use to know this Mr. Covell very well, Uncle Foster?"

"No-o—and yes. I didn't know him so very long, but for a time we were pretty close together, considering that he had made his start and I was just trying to make mine. It is queer that he should think enough of my opinion to ask me to help him in such a private job as managing his own boy. Losing his mind, is he, do you think?"

"I guess not. This letter doesn't read as if he were. I think he means just what he says when he calls you the best handler of men he ever knew. He must have known a great many men—and big men, too. It is a wonderful tribute to you, his remembering you and asking your help and advice, after all these years. What will you do, Uncle Foster?"

Townsend was plainly puzzled and concerned.

"I give it up," he said. "What can I do? I might get the young fellow a job in Boston, with some of my friends up there, maybe; but I should hardly like to recommend a chap I didn't know to any of them. His own father's recommendations aren't too strong, if you read between the lines."

"That is true. And, besides, Mr. Covell doesn't ask you to find him work in a city. He asks if there isn't something which will take him away from cities."

"So he does. And what is there down here for Seymour Covell's son? I doubt if digging clams or hauling lobster pots would suit him, or his father. And," with a chuckle, "I doubt just as much if he could fill either bill if he tried. I can't do anything, as I see it now. And yet—yet, by the Lord Harry, I hate to say no to the man who never said it to me. . . . *I*

don't know what to do—or say. Wish I did. See any light through the fog, Esther?"

She was rereading portions of the long letter.

"He suggests that his son might come here for a short visit," she reminded him. "He seems to think that, after you had seen him, and 'sized him up' as he says, you might be better able to judge what could be done—if anything. Why don't you invite him here for a few weeks? It looks to me as if you would *have* to do that, at least."

He nodded.

"Afraid you're right," he agreed. "I shall have to, of course. Humph! It's a blasted nuisance, isn't it. I don't want company—strangers—around the house—just now. I want to have you all to myself the short time you are going to be here. I can't spare a minute of you; haven't got many left. You'll be sailing in a fortni't."

She had an inspiration. She leaned toward him, eagerly.

"Why, Uncle Foster!" she cried. "I tell you what to do! Write and ask him to visit you, but plan to have him arrive just after I have gone. You will want some one here then, some one to talk to and keep you interested. You won't be half as lonely and I shall feel ever so much more contented, knowing that you aren't sole alone—or with no one but Nabby and Varunas. Come; that is a good idea, isn't it?"

He hesitated; then he nodded once more. "Good as any, I guess," he admitted. "I don't know but I'd just as soon be alone as with a young cub I'm supposed to keep a weather eye on and that, nine chances out of ten, I'll hate the sight of from the minute I lay eyes on him. . . . But I'll write and ask him. I'll write now, to-day."

She was turning over the sheets of Covell's letter. Now she uttered an exclamation.

"Here is something else," she exclaimed. "Something we haven't read. A postscript, written on the back of this last page. It says: 'I think you will like the boy, when you meet him. He has a knack of making people like him at first sight.

When they are the right people it is a valuable knack.' There, Uncle Foster, you see! You won't hate him, you will like him. I am ever so glad he is coming."

Just then there was a knock at the door leading from the kitchen. Varunas appeared with a yellow envelope in his hand.

"Telegram for you, Cap'n Foster," he announced. "Seth Canby's boy just fetched it up. Hope 'tain't no bad news. Nobody dead or nothin' like that."

Townsend took the envelope. "What do you mean by 'nothing like that'?" he observed. "I never saw anything like being dead except *being* dead, did you, Varunas?"

Nabby, who had followed her husband into the room, sniffed.

"You never saw *him* about gettin' up time of a winter mornin', then, Cap'n Foster," she declared. "If he ain't dead then he's a turrible good imitation."

Foster Townsend had torn open a yellow envelope. Now he threw the telegram upon the table and rose from his chair.

"Bah!" he snorted, disgustedly. "Can't they let me alone for two days running? I've got to go to Ostable this minute. Lawyer business again. . . . Well, what must be must. The train has gone long ago so I shall have to drive. Want to go with me, Esther?"

His niece shook her head. "I can't, Uncle Foster," she answered. "I promised Mr. Colton I would attend a meeting of the Welfare Society. Mrs. Wheeler and Mrs. Snow and ever so many more are to be there. They are thinking of getting up another entertainment of some kind to raise money. Of course I can't take part because I am going abroad, but I must help as long as I can."

Foster Townsend sniffed. "All right," he said. "If you promised you'll have to be there, I suppose. Well, I can't stand here. Hitch up the team, Varunas." Then thrusting the packet of unopened mail matter into his pocket, he added, "I'll read this after I get there. There'll be plenty of time. I never broke my back chasing over to that law office yet that

I didn't have to wait for somebody else who hadn't taken the trouble to break his. . . . Good-by, Esther."

He kissed her and hurried through the library to the hatrack in the hall. She called after him.

"You are going to write Mr. Covell and invite his son for that visit, aren't you, Uncle Foster?" she asked.

"Yes," he shouted in reply. "Got to, so far as I can see. I'll write him to-day, from over there. I'll have time enough for that, too, unless there has been a miracle and the whole crowd is on time for once."

After he had gone Esther remembered that she had not told him of Bob's proposed European trip. She would do it that evening. She wondered what he would say. A suggestion of Nabby Gifford's, made on the morning following Bob's last call but one, had lingered in her mind, although she had done her best to forget it. It was silly, it was outrageous, it was everything but sane and sensible, but she had not been able to dismiss it entirely from her thoughts. What *would* her uncle say when he learned that Bob Griffin was to be in Paris during her stay there? Well, she would soon know, for she would tell him as soon as he returned.

CHAPTER XIII

FOSTER TOWNSEND chose this time to dispense with Varunas's services and society on his drive to Ostable. He piloted the span himself, along the rutted stretches of yellow sand, between villages and over the white-surfaced roads of oyster and clamshell leading through the thickly settled portions of the villages themselves. And in Denboro and South Denboro and East Ostable and Ostable his progress was, as always, noticed and commented upon. Leading citizens bowed politely and called good mornings and the proletariat turned to stare and look after him. He acknowledged the bows and salutes with a careless wave of the hand and the stares he ignored. The universal attention was no novelty. Its absence would have been. He was the great man of his county and reverend recognition of that fact was his due.

Only in Denboro, the town adjacent to Harniss, was there a reminder that his supremacy was questioned. As the span trotted proudly along its main road he looked up to the top of the little hill behind the Methodist church and saw a rambling white house rising behind a high screen of lilac bushes and shadowed by wind-twisted silver-leaf poplars. He frowned as he looked, for in that house dwelt the two most disturbing factors in his life at present, Elisha Cook, his one-time partner, and Bob Griffin, whom he had begun to consider quite as much of a nuisance as his grandfather. The frown changed to a grim smile, however, as he reflected that one nuisance, at least, was to be abated. Esther would soon be beyond Griffin's reach. Absence, so the proverb declared, made the heart grow fonder, but it was his firm conviction, based upon years of experience, that if the absence was long enough it was much more likely to cure a heartache than to augment it, especially when the patient was as young as his niece. That was a good suggestion

of Reliance Clark's, that of sending Esther away. He probably would have thought of it himself sooner or later, but her suggestion had been timely and had prevented what might have been dangerous delay. He was grateful to Reliance and he must stop in at the Clark cottage soon and tell her so. He had not called on her for nearly a month.

His prophecy of a long wait at the lawyer's office was, for once, proven false. When he entered the rooms in the building opposite the courthouse he found the whole battery of legal talent already there and awaiting him. Not only both members of the Ostable firm, but the two Boston consultants and a specialist in Supreme Court procedures as well. A talented and tremendously expensive outfit it was. A less self-assured man than Foster Townsend might have felt overawed by this assemblage of big brains and bigger bills. Not he, however. He acknowledged their deferential greetings with curt pleasantness and proceeded to take charge of the meeting and dominate it.

It was neither a protracted session nor one too cheerful. Trial in Washington of the famous lawsuit had been finally set sometime in the late winter or early spring. He grumbled at that, but apparently no earlier date could be arranged.

"Good Lord!" he growled. "If I had handled my ship the way you lawyers handle your business I never would have brought her into port more than twice in a lifetime. Well, there is this to be said, anyhow: This is the last lap. When we win this time we *win*."

There was a general and smiling nod of agreement. One of the two Boston attorneys, a white-haired and dignified aristocrat, voiced the feeling.

"Yes, Captain Townsend," he said, "if we win our case before the Supreme Court the other side can have no appeal. That will be final."

One word of this statement stirred his resentment.

"*If* we win!" he snapped. "We are going to win, aren't we? What do you mean by 'if'?"

The Boston man smiled. "There is always an 'if' in any case, Captain Townsend," he explained. "If there had been none in this one the Cook people would not have gained their appeal and we should not have to go to Washington."

Townsend brushed this aside with an impatient hand.

"Never mind that," he said. "What I want to hear you say is that you know you are going to win this case for me. You *are* going to win it, aren't you?"

"We hope to, certainly."

He leaned back in his chair. "You've got to," he declared, striking the table with his palm. "If you don't— By the Almighty you've got to!"

They assured him that they expected to win, that they felt scarcely a doubt of winning. Nevertheless, when the consultation ended, he was left with the consciousness that there was a doubt in their minds, even though it might be a faint one. He had been made to feel that same consciousness at other meetings since the granting of the Cook appeal. Suppose that doubt should be justified? Suppose the suit was, after all, decided against him!

In spite of his dogged courage and belief in his own destiny a cold shiver passed through his body. For a moment he saw a picture of himself, beaten, humiliated—yes, even impoverished. But he would not consider such a thing, he would not admit the possibility of it. He was Foster Townsend, and Foster Townsend had never been beaten yet.

He rose from his seat with a laugh. "You law fellows are worse croakers than a bunch of bullfrogs in a pond," he declared. "Stop your croaking and supposing and shove this thing through. . . . Well, I guess that's all you want of me this morning, isn't it, gentlemen?"

The Boston attorney—his name was Wolcott—seemed to hesitate. He twirled his gold-rimmed eyeglasses at the end of their black silk cord.

"We were wondering—" he began. "Well, Captain Townsend, to speak frankly—"

"Humph! Do you lawyers ever speak that way?"

"Why, occasionally, when we think it necessary. We were wondering if, should any new points develop which were—ahem—shall we say antagonistic to our side of the case, if you would wish us to consider—well, a compromise."

He glanced at them. They were all regarding him earnestly; one or two, it seemed, almost anxiously.

"Compromise!" he repeated, with incredulous scorn. "Compromise? Make some sort of deal, a half-way trade, with Elisha Cook's crew? Is that what you mean? When they get one red cent from me they'll have to take it by main strength. Compromise be hanged! You fight, do you hear? Fight—and lick 'em!"

It was half past eleven when he left the room. He had planned to dine at the Ostable House, and drive home afterward, but dinner would not be ready until twelve. He walked over to the hotel and, because idling and thinking were not cheerful or amusing just then, he decided to fill in the half hour by writing his reply to Seymour Covell's letter. He did write it, expressing some doubt as to his ability to find a satisfactory position for his friend's son immediately, but extending a hearty invitation to the latter to visit him at Harniss. He did not, however, follow Esther's suggestion that that visit be delayed until after her European trip had begun. He saw no reason for such delay. Let the young fellow come at once, if he wanted to. What difference did it make when he came?

"Send the boy along," he wrote. "The sooner the better. And tell him for me that he can stay as long as he likes. There's room enough, goodness knows. And the longer he stays the better chance I shall have to look him over and decide what sort of job he will fit into, when he gets ready to take it. Why don't you come, yourself? A month or so down here in the sand will blow some of that Chicago soot out of your head. I always told you this was the healthiest place on God's earth. You come and I'll prove it."

After dinner, as he brought the span abreast the Ostable post office, he pulled the horses to a halt and handed the letter to a citizen who was standing on the platform.

"Here, mail that for me, will you?" he said. The citizen received the letter as he might have received a commission from the governor.

"Yes, sir; yes, indeed, Cap'n Townsend," he replied, with unction.

"Much obliged. And mail it right away. Don't put it in your pocket and forget it."

"Forget it! I wouldn't forget it for nothin'. No, *sir!*"

"Well, it is more than nothing, so I don't want it forgotten."

He waited until he saw the letter deposited in the mail slot in the post-office door. Then he clucked to the span and drove on.

It was not yet four o'clock when he reached Harniss. It occurred to him that Esther would not be at home when he got there; she would have gone to that Welfare Society meeting, or whatever it was. He did not feel inclined to sit alone in the library and think; memories of that confounded Boston attorney's "if" were still too clear to make thinking pleasant. They angered him. What was the matter with the crowd over there in Ostable? What had become of all the assured complacency with which they had greeted him at similar consultations of but a year ago? Losing their grit, were they? Letting appeals and delays and all that sort of legal drivel get on their nerves? The case was as surely his now as it was then. Flock of old hens! With what delight would he, when the long-drawn-out mess was ended and the decision his, pay them off and send them packing. Bah!

He shook his head to drive away these symptoms of what he would have called the "doldrums," looked up and saw that he was nearly opposite the Clark cottage. He would drop in on Reliance now, this minute. She was always a first-class antidote for doldrums.

He hitched the span to the gnawed post before the post

office and walked around the buildings to the door of the millinery shop. Reliance was in the shop, making tucks in a yard of ribbon.

"Hello, there!" he hailed, striding in and closing the door behind him. "Well, how are things in the hat line? Thought I'd stop and see if you could make Varunas a sunbonnet. He's getting to be more of an old woman every day he lives."

Reliance looked up and smiled. "Hello, Foster," she said. "You're a stranger. It's been a long while since you honored us this way. I hope a lot of folks saw you come in. It will be good for business. Sit down, won't you?"

He had not waited for the invitation. He sat in the chair usually occupied by Miss Makepeace, which squeaked a protest, and tossed his hat upon the top of the sewing machine.

"All alone?" he queried. "Where's your first mate?"

"Abbie? Oh, she's at home with a cold. She has been barkin' and sneezin' around here for three days, so I told her to stay at home and sneeze it through with a hot brick at her feet and a linseed poultice on her chest. She'll be over it pretty soon. How are you?"

"All right. Where's the town superintendent?"

"Who? . . . Oh, I suppose you mean Millard. He is out, too. He won't be back for an hour."

"How do you know he won't?"

"Because he ought to be back now. Well, Foster, how do you like the prospect of being alone again in that big house of yours? Be a harder pull than ever for you, won't it?"

"You bet! . . . But, say," leaning back in the chair and thrusting his hands into his pockets, "how did you know I was going to be alone? Isn't there such a thing as privacy in this town?"

"Not much. I should think you would have learned that by this time. There, there! don't get mad. I don't believe it is generally known yet. Esther told me herself, but she told me not to tell. She said you asked her not to talk about it much yet."

"Um-hum. Yes, I did. However, she can talk about it now as much as she wants to. She will be sailing in ten days or so. I only wish I was booked for the same ship."

Reliance held up the ribbon, measured the latest tuck and then folded another.

"I was a little surprised when she said you wasn't," she observed. "The lawsuit is keepin' you here, she told me."

"Yes, blast the thing! There, don't talk about that. I've just come from a lawyers' meeting and I have had enough for the present. . . . Yes, Esther is going across the water. She'll stay there, too—until I figure it is good judgment to bring her home."

Miss Clark looked up, then down. She nodded.

"I see," she said. "You had to come to it, after all, didn't you. I suppose likely I was the one who put the idea in your head, so I ought to take the responsibility."

"No, you needn't. I'll take it myself. I should have thought of some such thing, sooner or later, without your help. But I'm much obliged for the reminder, just the same."

Again she looked up.

"Too much company up your way, wasn't there?" she suggested.

"Too darned much, of the kind. That young Griffin has got as much cheek as his whole family together. And that doesn't mean a little bit. . . . Humph! I'm a long sea mile from being sure that I ought to have let him come there in the first place. You were responsible for that, too, Reliance. Remember?"

"Of course I remember. But you must remember that I told you unless he and Esther were different from most any young couple I ever heard of they would find ways to see each other anyhow, and it might be best to let them meet where you were within hailin' distance. I think I was right—even yet."

"What do you mean by 'even yet'?"

"Nothing. Nothing now, at any rate. Foster, how far has

this affair of theirs gone? Are they—well, do you think they are any more than just good friends?"

"Eh," sharply. "Any more? Now why do you ask that. If I thought—"

"Ssh! What *do* you think? . . . Careful of that chair! That's Abbie's pet rocker."

He had thrown himself back in it with a violence which threatened wreck and ruin.

"How should I know what to think?" he growled, moodily. "He comes three times a week and stays till eleven o'clock. And they sit alone in the sitting-room and talk, talk, talk about— Oh, I don't know what they talk about! The price of quahaugs, maybe."

"Maybe." She glanced at him and smiled. "You go away and leave them there together, then, do you, Foster?" she said. "Well, that is pretty nice of you, I must say. And, perhaps, kind of hard to do, too."

He stirred uneasily and scowled. "Did you think I was likely to hang around and listen at the keyhole?" he demanded.

"Not the least little bit. I know you. . . . Well, let me ask you a plain question. Suppose she and Bob Griffin did get to be something more than friends; what would you do then?"

His big body straightened. "Do!" he repeated. "If you mean what would I do if she proposed to marry that scamp. I'll tell you without any if, and, or but. I've told you before. I wouldn't let her do it."

"She might do it without your lettin'."

"Then, by the Almighty, she could do without me, too. If she left my house to marry him she should stay out and never come back. . . . But she wouldn't. She isn't that kind. . . . Here! what the devil are you shaking your head about?"

"Oh—well, I was just thinkin'."

"Stop thinking, then! Don't be a fool, Reliance! Why, that girl has told me fifty times that she thinks as much of me as if I was her own father. She talks about how kind I've been to her and how she never can pay me back and all that. Do

you suppose that is all lies? Do you think she'd throw me over for that—that Cook calf? Don't be a fool, I tell you. Look here! What is this all about? Do you *want* her to marry him?"

A slow shake of the head prefaced Reliance's answer. And that answer was gravely spoken.

"No, Foster," she said. "I don't."

"Of course you don't, unless you *are* a fool. And, if every fool in creation wanted it, she shouldn't do it."

Reliance paid no attention to this declaration. She had dropped the ribbon in her lap and now she spoke earnestly and deliberately.

"No, Foster," she repeated. "I *don't* want her to marry Bob Griffin. He seems to be a fine young man and a good one, but the reason why I don't want that marriage isn't on account of what he is, but who he is. This whole matter has worried me a lot. It worries me now. I can't see anything but trouble ahead for everybody if it goes on."

"Humph! You don't need a spyglass to see that. Well, it isn't going on. It will stop inside of two weeks. Once get the Atlantic Ocean between them and it will stay between them until they both forget—until she does, anyhow. He can remember until he is gray-headed if he likes, it won't do him any good."

She had picked up her sewing again, but now she looked up from it with, or so he thought, an odd expression. Since the beginning of their conversation he had been conscious of something unusual in her manner. Now there was a peculiar questioning scrutiny in her look; she seemed to be wondering, to be not quite sure—almost as if she were expecting him to say something, he could not imagine what.

"Why are you staring at me like that?" he demanded, irritably. "What is it?"

She did not reply to his question, but asked one of her own, one quite irrelevant and trivial, so far as he could see.

"Have you heard any news lately?" she inquired.

"News? What kind of news?"

"Oh, any news about—well, about any one we know?"

"No. . . . See here, what do you mean? Have you heard something?"

Again she did not answer. "Foster," she said, sewing steadily, "I don't want you to get the idea from what I just told you about my feelin's that I think Esther's marryin' Bob Griffin would be the very worst thing that could happen. . . . Wait! let me finish. I don't think it would be a wise thing, considerin' the way you and Mr. Cook hate each other and the way you both would be likely to act if those young folks took the bit in their teeth and decided to marry, anyhow. And if Esther and he can forget I should say it was best they did, best for all hands. But if they care enough for each other so that they can't forget and will be miserable and sorry all their days, then I honestly believe they should go through with it. After all, they are young, they have got their lives to live. It is for them, and nobody else, to really decide how they shall live 'em. That is the way I feel and I guess you ought to know it."

He rose from the rocker. He was angry, so angry that he could scarcely trust himself to speak.

"Yes," he growled, with savage sarcasm, "you are right in that. Mighty well right! I guess it is high time I knew it. So you have been putting her up to—"

"Stop! I haven't put her up to anything. She and I have hardly mentioned Bob Griffin's name for a month. If she had asked me what I thought about it I should have told her what I just told you, that the less she saw of him the better. And when she told me you were sendin' her abroad I knew why you were doin' it and I was glad. It, or somethin' like it, was what I hoped you would do. In fact, you just now hinted that I was the one who put doin' it into your head. Don't make silly speeches that you know ain't true, Foster Townsend."

This appeal to common sense and justice had some effect. He took a stride or two up and down the room and when he

spoke his tone was a trifle less fierce although just as determined.

"You have said enough, anyhow," he declared. "Now you hear me say this: She isn't going to marry that cub. She isn't. If taking her to Paris and keeping him out of her sight doesn't cure her then I'll try something that will. I'll—by the Lord Almighty, if worst comes to worst I'll—I'll kill him before I let one of his gang take her away from me."

She laughed a little. "Killin' him would be a fine way to keep her with you, wouldn't it?" she observed. "If you will only behave like a sensible man, and talk like one, I'll tell you something else, something you will know soon but that perhaps you'd better know now."

He was paying no attention. Now he turned to her, his face drawn with emotion and his voice shaking.

"Reliance," he cried, "you don't know—by the Lord, you don't know what that girl has come to be to me. I—I love her as much as I did—as I did Bella, my own wife, when she was living. I swear I believe that's so. She'll marry somebody some day; I am reconciled to that—or I try to be. It's natural. It is what is bound to happen. But I'll have something to say about who her husband shall be. I know men and it's got to be a mighty fine man who can satisfy me he's the right husband for her. A good-for-nothing who wastes his time painting chromos—a boy without any business sense—"

"How do you know he hasn't got any business sense?"

"Would he be a picture painter if he had? And a Cook! Good Lord! think of it! a Cook! . . . There! What's the use talking to you? You are a sentimental old maid and all that counts with you is the mush you read in the fool books you get out of the library. If you loved that girl the way I do—"

She had risen now and she broke in upon him sharply.

"I do," she vowed. "I love her as much as you do and more, perhaps. She lived with me years longer than she has with you and I love her as much as you ever dreamed of

doin'. Yes, and a whole lot more unselfishly—that I know, too."

"But, Reliance, to give her up to—"

"Oh, be still! I gave her up to you, didn't I? Do you think that wasn't a wrench?"

He could not deny it, for he knew it to be true. He shrugged and picked up his hat.

"Good-by," he said.

She called his name.

"Foster—wait!" she ordered. "Now I am goin' to tell you somethin' it is plain you haven't heard. I wonder Esther hasn't told you. She must know it. Probably she will tell you soon, she certainly ought to. There was a man here this mornin' from Denboro. His name is Pratt, he peddles fish, probably you know him. Well, he told me he heard last night at the Denboro post office that Bob Griffin was plannin' to go to Paris to study paintin'. His grandfather had said he might and he was leavin' almost right away, inside of three weeks, anyhow. . . . Perhaps you see what that is likely to mean, so far as keepin' him and Esther apart is concerned."

He stared at her incredulously; he could not credit the story.

"Bosh!" he snorted. "I don't believe it. It's all a lie. They've got it mixed up. Somebody has heard that Esther is going, and of course some of them know he has been coming to the house, and so they've pieced together a gaff tops'l out of two rags and a rope's end, same as they generally do."

"No. That is what I thought at first, but it isn't that. Pratt heard about it again from the Cooks' hired girl and she heard Bob and his grandfather talkin' it over at the dinner table. It is true, he is goin'. And of course it is perfectly plain why he is goin'. . . . Now, Foster, what will you do about it?"

He did not answer immediately. He stood before her, his florid face growing steadily redder. Then he struck his right fist into the palm of his left hand.

"That is why she was so full of good humor this morning,"

he muttered. "He told her last night and— *That* was it! . . . Good-by."

"Wait! Wait, Foster! What are you goin' to do?"

"Do! I don't know yet, but you can bet your life something will be done."

"Oh, Foster, you must be awfully careful. If you aren't—"

"Careful! I tell you one thing I'll be mighty careful of. I'll be careful to call off this Paris business. *That* is over and done with, so far as she is concerned. She stays here with me. As for him—well, I'll attend to *him.*"

"But, Foster, you *must* take care what you do. If you'll only listen to me—"

He was at the door.

"No!" he shouted. "I've listened too long already. Listen to you! Why, it was you that put me up to sending her away. Humph! And a fine mess that has got us all into, hasn't it! No! From now on, I'm handlin' this affair myself and I don't want any orders or advice from anybody. You keep your hands off the reins. We'll see who wins this case. The rascal!"

She followed him to the step and stood looking after him, but he did not look back. She saw him climb to the carriage seat, crack the whip over the backs of the span—the horses were astonished and indignant, for they were not used to such treatment—and move rapidly off up the road. Then she went back to her sewing, but her mind was not upon her work; she foresaw nothing ahead but trouble, trouble for those in the world for whose happiness she cared most.

CHAPTER XIV

FOSTER TOWNSEND drove straight home, turned the horses and carriage over to the care of Varunas and went into the house. There, in the library, with the portières drawn and the hall door tightly closed, he sprawled in the big chair and, chewing an unlighted cigar, set himself to the task of facing this entirely unforeseen setback. His carefully laid plan had gone to smash; that fact could not be dodged. Paris with Esther in Jane Carter's company, three thousand miles away from young Griffin, was one thing. Paris, with those two together, and he, Townsend, on this side of the water, was quite another. No, if it was true that Griffin was going there, then Esther was not. So much was certain.

It was a galling conclusion, his pride winced under it. To think that a boy in his twenties had forced a wily, shrewd veteran of his years and experience to back water was almost too much to bear. It was humiliating and the more he pondered over it the angrier he became. The plan had been a good one. He had given it careful consideration before he adopted it. He had tried to think of every possible objection, but such a one as this he would have considered beyond the bounds of possibility. And yet it was so simple. How that Griffin cub must be chuckling in his sleeve. Of course he had seen through the strategy behind the move and with one move of his own had checkmated it. Esther was being sent to Paris to get her away from him, was she? All right, he would go there, too. Easy enough!

Foster Townsend's big body squirmed in the leather chair. He was tempted, almost resolved, to go straight to Bob Griffin, wherever he might be, even in his grandfather's house, and

have it out between them, man to man—or man to boy. The prospect of an open battle was appealing. And he was practically sure that Elisha Cook would, for once, be fighting on his side. Elisha would, he was willing to bet, be as firmly set against a marriage between a Cook and a Townsend as he was, although their objections would be based upon exactly opposite grounds. It would be amusing, at least, to watch his former partner's face when he learned why his grandson proposed to leave him—and for whom. For Bob had not told, of course. Humph! Between them they could give that smart young rooster a happy half hour.

It would not do, though; no, it would not do. Mistakes enough had been made and he, Townsend, must not make another. Whatever was done now must be right and he could not afford to be too hasty. At any rate, the first thing to be done was to think of good excuses for canceling Esther's European trip. He had little time for that and he must act quickly.

So, setting his teeth, he endeavored to forget anger, hurt pride, and all the rest of the non-essentials. The checkmating was partly his own fault. He had taken a woman's advice, instead of depending upon his own judgment, and was paying for it. It was Reliance Clark who had put into his head the fool notion of sending his niece away. Neither she, nor any one else, should put another there. Henceforward he would, as he had told her, handle the reins. And the race was by no means lost.

He was in his room on the second floor, writing a letter, when he heard Esther's voice in the library.

"Uncle," she was calling. "Uncle Foster, where are you?"

"Here I am," he answered, "I'll be down in a minute."

He signed the letter he had written and addressed the envelope to Mrs. Jane Carter in Boston. He had given her orders, short, sharp and compelling. She was not to waste time asking questions. She was to write what he told her to write and do it at once. And when he saw her he would tell her why.

He was as sorry as she could be that the affair had turned out as it had.

Esther's good humor at supper time was as pronounced as it had been in the morning. She was nervous, however; he could see that. He did his best to appear good humored also. When they were in the library together the cause for her nervousness was disclosed. She told him at once about Bob Griffin's going to Paris to study art. His reception of the news was far different from what she feared it might be. He appeared to regard it as a good thing for Bob to do.

"Why, Uncle Foster!" she exclaimed. "Aren't you awfully surprised? I was, when Bob told me, last evening. I had no idea he even thought of such a thing—for the present, at least."

Her uncle rubbed his beard. "He is studying to paint pictures, just as you are studying to sing," he observed. "According to what I hear, they teach both those things better over yonder than they do here. I don't wonder he wants to go. Good idea, I should say. When is he going?"

"Very soon. In a few weeks, he says. His grandfather has said that he might."

"Has, eh? Humph! Elisha must have more money than I thought he had. Paying lawyers can't be as expensive for him as it is for me. Or," with a twist of his mouth, "perhaps he doesn't pay 'em."

Esther hastened to explain. "Bob has some money of his own," she said. "His grandfather won't have to pay any of his expenses."

"Oh! . . . Oh, yes, yes! He's rich, then, as well as handsome—and smart?"

He had not meant to emphasize the "smart," but he did, a little. She noticed it.

"Bob *is* smart," she declared. "Every one says he is."

"And I suppose he lets 'em say it. Well, maybe he is as smart as he thinks he is. We'll see how it turns out."

"What turns out? His painting, do you mean? Oh, I am

sure he is going to be a wonderful artist. Just look at that portrait he did of me, with scarcely any study at all."

He did not look at the portrait and he talked very little during the evening. Esther did not mind. She was relieved that he had not shown resentment when told that Griffin was to be in Paris during her own stay there. Well, at all events, this proved that Nabby Gifford's insinuation had not a word of truth behind it.

Nothing of moment happened in the Townsend household until Tuesday morning. Then, when breakfast was over, her uncle called her into the library. He had a letter in his hand and there was a serious expression on his face. He asked her to sit down, but he did not sit. Instead he paced up and down the floor, a sure sign that he was much disturbed in mind.

"Esther," he said, turning toward her, "I've got some bad news for you. I'm afraid you will think it is pretty bad, when I tell you what it is. I got a letter yesterday. I didn't say anything about it then. I always think the morning is the time to face bad news; you have all day to get used to it in and consequently you can sleep better when bedtime comes. . . . Well, we might as well get it over. Esther, it looks as if you wasn't going abroad, after all—now, I mean."

She caught her breath. She had been trying to surmise what the bad news might be, but she had not thought of this.

"Not going abroad!" she repeated, aghast. "You mean I am not going to Paris?"

He nodded. "That is just about what I do mean, I guess," he affirmed. "It looks as if you couldn't go—for the present, anyhow. Of course, by and by, later on, you and I will go together, same as we used to plan; but your cruise with Mrs. Carter is off, I'm afraid. . . . It is a big disappointment for you, isn't it? Yes, I can see that it is."

Any one could have seen it. The expression upon her face was sufficient indication of the shock of that disappointment. He, himself, was anything but happy. This thing he was doing was for her good; some of those days she would realize that

and be grateful to him, but now—well, now the doing of it made him feel meanly guilty. He put his hand on her shoulder.

"Sorry, Esther," he said, with a shake in his voice. "I'm sorry enough things have turned out as they have, but—well, it is for the best, I guess. Yes," with a nod of stubborn determination, "I *know* it is. Now, don't feel too bad, my girl. Try and brace up. Come!"

She was trying, but it was hard work. If he had told her this before Bob had told her of his going she would not have minded so much. Since then—and particularly since the time when she had told him of Bob's proposed trip and he had received the tidings with such complacency—she had thought of little else but the wonderful days to come.

He patted her shoulder.

"Brace up, Esther," he said. "It isn't off for good, remember. You and I will go over there together by and by, just as sure as I live. It is just put off for the present, that's all."

"But why, Uncle Foster?" she faltered. "Why? What has happened?"

He told her Mrs. Carter had written saying she could not go. Various things had turned up—he was not specific concerning the nature of these things—which made it impossible for her to leave her Boston house for some months at least.

"It's too late to get any one else," he explained, gently. "And, besides, I don't know of any one else I could trust to pilot a cruise like that with you aboard. We must face it as it is. There are lots of disappointments in life; I have had my share of them. And pretty generally," with another dogged nod, "they turn out to be for the best in the end. You just try and believe this one will turn out that way."

She told him that she would try, but her tone was so forlorn that his feeling of meanness and guilt increased. And her next speech strengthened them still more.

"I won't be a baby, Uncle Foster," she bravely answered him. "I know you are as sorry as I am. It isn't your fault at all, of course. And," with an attempt at a smile, "I know, too,

that I ought to be glad for your sake. I have never felt right about leaving you."

He shifted uneasily and gave the "cricket" before the easy-chair a kick which sent it sliding across the floor.

"Don't talk that way," he growled. "I—Humph! Well, I'll make this all up to you before we finish, I'll swear to that. . . . Say," with a sudden inspiration, "I tell you one thing we'll do! I shall have to go to Washington one of these days and I'll take you with me. We'll have a regular spree along with the President and the rest of the big-bugs. That will be something to look forward to, anyhow."

Perhaps, but, compared to that toward which she had been looking, it was a very poor substitute. And all the rest of that day her disappointment increased rather than diminished. She dreaded Bob's call that evening. Poor fellow! he would be as disappointed as she was. But he must go, just the same. He must not sacrifice his opportunity for travel and study because hers was postponed. He must go as he had planned. She should insist upon that.

There were other thoughts, too, but she tried not to think them. It had seemed to her that her uncle's reasons—or Mrs. Carter's reasons—for canceling the trip had been rather vague and not altogether sufficient to warrant upsetting the plans of so many people. And the decision was so sudden. Her last letter from the lady had contained not a hint of change. It was full of enthusiastic anticipation. Her uncle—

She resolutely refused to think along that line. Her uncle had felt so badly when he broke the news to her. She remembered the tremble in his voice. No, she would not be so disloyal or ungrateful as to suspect. . . . Never mind Nabby's suggestion. Nabby was what her employer sometimes called her, a clucking old hen.

She would have gone to her Aunt Reliance and sought consolation there, but the Welfare Society met again that afternoon and she felt bound to attend the meeting.

Bob Griffin, when he came that evening, was in such a

glow of high spirits that he could scarcely wait for Foster Townsend to leave the library before voicing his feelings. Townsend appeared to notice his condition.

"You look fit as a fiddle to-night, seems to me," he observed. "Counting the days till you get to Paris, I suppose; eh? Well, I don't wonder. Pretty big thing for a young fellow."

Bob was a little surprised.

"Oh, then Esther has told you about it?" he asked.

"Um-hum. She told me."

"What do you think of the idea, sir? Of my going there to study, I mean?"

"Think it is just what you should do. If you've made up your mind to paint for a living then the better painter you learn to be the better living you'll make—if you can live at all at that job. . . . Oh, yes, yes!" he added, before either of the pair could reply. "I suppose likely you think you can. And you may be right. *I* don't know about such things."

The moment the hall door had closed behind him Bob turned to Esther and seized her hands.

"Only a few more weeks," he announced, triumphantly. "In less than a month you and I will be sauntering down the Champs Elysées or the 'Boul Mich' or somewhere. I have engaged my passage. I am going on the *Lavornia*. She sails from New York just eight days after your ship leaves. We shan't be separated long, shall we?"

She withdrew her hands from his and shook her head.

"Bob," she said, "I have dreaded seeing you to-night. I have something to tell you that you won't like at all. I don't like it either, but it can't be helped. All our plans are changed. I am not going to Paris."

He stared. "Not going to Paris?" he repeated. "Where are you going?"

"Nowhere, for the present. I am going to stay here in Harniss. . . . Wait! Please wait, and I'll tell you all about it."

She told him of the letter from Mrs. Carter and her uncle's decision that the European trip must be postponed. He would

have interrupted a half dozen times, but she begged him not to.

"So you see, Bob," she said, in conclusion, "you and I won't meet over there as soon as we expected. I can't go now, although perhaps some day I shall. I am glad you are going. I am awfully glad of that."

He had risen and was standing before her. His lips were set and he was frowning. Now he laughed scornfully.

"Esther," he protested, "don't! Don't be silly. You can't really think I would go if you didn't."

"Why, of course I do. You must go. Certainly you are going."

"Certainly I am not. Huh! I should say not! If you don't go neither do I. If they make you wait I'll wait, too."

"Bob! Oh, please, Bob, be reasonable. Think of what it means to you. Your chance to study, to go on with your painting, to get ahead in the world! Do you suppose I shall let you give up your opportunity just because mine is postponed for a while? Did you think me as selfish as that?"

He shook his head. "You bet I don't go!" he muttered. "Indeed I don't! They don't get me away from you as easily as that comes to."

"Bob! . . . What do you mean by that? No one is trying to get you away from me."

Again he laughed. "Oh, Esther," he said, impatiently, "don't let's pretend. You know what this means as well as I do. It is as plain as print. Captain Townsend—"

"It isn't his fault. It is Mrs. Carter who can't go. That is the reason."

"Esther! Can't you *see?* Oh, but of course you do! This Mrs. Carter is doing what your uncle has told her to do. She has called it off, trumped up the excuse, because he ordered her to do it."

"Bob!" sharply. "Stop! You mustn't say such things. You know they aren't true. Why, it was Uncle Foster who persuaded Mrs. Carter to go, in the first place."

"Yes, and now he has ordered her not to. Bah!" with an

angry wave of the hand, "it is as plain as if it was painted on the wall. He doesn't want me coming here to see you; he never did."

"Then why did he let you come at all?"

"I don't know—unless it was because he thought we might be seeing each other somewhere else anyhow, and he could keep an eye on us as long as we were in his house."

"Bob! If you say another word like that I shall go away and leave you. Uncle Foster knows that he doesn't need to keep an eye on me. He trusts me absolutely."

She was indignant, but he was angry and sure of the correctness of his suspicions.

"He doesn't trust *me,* then," he declared, stubbornly. "He hates me, because I am a Cook. He was sending you to Europe to get you where I couldn't see you. Well, I guessed that little trick right away and played a better one on him. I decided to go to Paris myself. He had not thought of that, I guess. It must have jolted him when you told him."

"Bob, I won't listen to such things."

"And then, when you did tell him, he saw his little game was up and so he has made up his mind to keep you here. Well, all right, then he can keep me here, too. He isn't the only one who can change their mind. I'd like to tell him so."

He strode to the hall door and stood there almost as if determined to follow Foster Townsend to his room and tell him there and then. She was silent for a moment. The things he had said were in exact confirmation of the suspicion voiced by Nabby Gifford and which she had not permitted herself to consider.

"The sly old rat!" he muttered between his teeth. She caught her breath.

"No!" she cried. "No, I don't believe a word of it. . . . And even if it were true—which it isn't—it mustn't make any difference in your going. You must sail on the *Lavornia* just as you planned."

He spoke over his shoulder. "I shan't," he vowed, determinedly. "I stay right here."

"No, you mustn't do any such thing. I shan't let you."

"You can't stop me. . . . No, and he can't either. The scheming old hypocrite!"

She walked to the door now and opened it.

"You had better go home," she said. "I don't care to hear you speak in this way any longer. When you are ready to talk and behave like a sensible person you may come back and perhaps I will listen to you. But not until you beg my pardon for saying such things about Uncle Foster."

He swung about to face her. "But, Esther," he cried, "you know they are true."

"I know you ought to be ashamed of yourself for saying them, for calling him a hypocrite and all the rest."

"Well, what else is he? Making believe to you that—"

"Stop! Will you go now, please?"

"Of course I shan't! I have only just come. Esther, dear, I am sorry if I said more than I should. I am mad clear through. Oh, we must not quarrel because—because he—"

"*Will* you stop talking about him? And will you go this minute?"

He jammed his hands into his pockets. His face was flushed and hers white, but the fire in his eyes was dying. He tried to take her hand, but she drew it away.

"Do you really want me to go—now?" he asked, incredulously. "You can't mean it, dear."

"I do mean it. I think it is very much better that you should. You have said enough to-night, more than enough. I don't want to hear more and I don't feel like talking, myself. Please go."

He hesitated, then he surrendered.

"Perhaps you are right," he admitted. "I guess I am not very good company; shan't be until I get over this. When I come again I'll try to behave more like a Christian. I am awfully sorry, dear. You will make allowances and forgive

me, won't you? Good heavens, think what a disappointment this has been for me. All my plans—"

"They were my plans, too."

"Yes, so they were. Well, when may I come again? I sha'n't have to wait until Friday, shall I? This little bit of a half hour doesn't really count, you know. May I come to-morrow night?"

"No. I want you to take time to think this all over. And when you come I want to hear you say that you will go ahead just as you intended."

"Without you?"

"Certainly; without me for the present."

"Esther Townsend, are *you* in on this? Are *you* trying to get rid of me?"

She looked at him. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself," she said, icily. "Good night."

"Oh, I didn't mean it! You know I didn't. I am—I am talking like a fool, of course. But you don't really expect me to go across the Atlantic Ocean and leave you on this side? You don't really ask me to do that?"

"I do. It is for your sake. For the sake of your work and all it means. I don't want to see you again until you are ready to promise me just that."

His chin lifted. "Then I am afraid you won't see me very soon," he declared.

"That is for you to say. If you don't care enough, or trust me enough, to make a promise I ask you to make, especially when what I ask is entirely for your good, then—well then, perhaps you had better not come at all."

"Esther, the other night you said—you told me— And now you want me to go off three thousand miles and leave you! Well, I must say!"

"Bob, will you make me that promise?"

"I—I— Oh, I don't know! It doesn't seem as if I could."

"And if you do make it, will you keep it? You promised me

weeks ago that you would tell your grandfather of your coming to this house to see me. Have you told him?"

He frowned. That promise had been on his mind every waking moment since it was made. Time and time again he had been on the point of telling Elisha Cook of his visits to the Townsend mansion, but always the time had seemed inopportune. He was no coward, but he knew, better than she or any one else knew, the storm which was sure to follow. It might mean a complete break between his grandfather and himself, and he loved the old man dearly. Yet he had meant to keep his promise, still meant to do so.

He shook his head.

"Well, no, Esther, I haven't yet. We have had one tremendous row in the family lately, when I told him I was going abroad. I haven't had the spunk to risk another. I shall tell him, though—and soon. Please don't think—"

"Oh, hush! What need is there to think? I can see. Good night."

The door closed. He stood, for a minute, looking at the ground glass in its panels. Then the light behind those panels went out. He turned away, in a state of mind divided between disgust, resentment and discouragement. Women were a noncomprehensible lot, and the best of them seemed to be as illogical and unreasonable as the worst. It was a thought by no means original, but he considered it a discovery all his own. He walked to the stable, climbed into his buggy and drove, in miserable reverie, to Denboro.

Upstairs in the pink room Esther was lying upon the bed, her wet cheeks buried in the pillows. The things Bob had said about her uncle were wicked—wicked. But if they were true then her uncle was wicked. And, in that case, she, herself, for having treated Bob as she had, was the most wicked of all. It was a wicked, hateful world altogether.

CHAPTER XV

"IF" is one of the shortest words in the English language and also one of the most important. "If" Elisha Cook had not been taken ill with a cold, accompanied by complications threatening pneumonia, the complications now threatening the love story of his grandson and Foster Townsend's niece might not have been aggravated. The disagreement between the young people was serious, but not too dangerous. Had that particular "if" not arisen— But it did arise.

Bob, when he reached Denboro that evening, had made up his mind on one point, namely, that he would, the very next morning, keep his promise to Esther and tell his grandfather that he had been calling at the big house in Harniss and why he had done so. The prospect was anything but cheerful and what its consequences might be he did not dare consider. He was ashamed of his procrastination, although he still believed his reasons for the delay to be good ones. If left to himself he would have waited even longer, for, as he saw it, nothing was to be gained and perhaps much lost by premature disclosure of his secret. But, right or wrong, he would disclose it now. She should not have another opportunity to taunt him with lack of courage and failure to keep his word.

As to the other promise she had demanded, that he carry out his plan to go abroad regardless of the fact that she was to remain at home, that was harder to give. He was not sure that he would give it. He would wait until they met again and he had further opportunity to plead his side of the case. She was unreasonable in demanding such a thing and he hoped, after she had had time to think it over, she would realize that unreasonableness.

Her uncle—there was the trouble. Foster Townsend was

to blame. He was a sly, scheming old hypocrite, just as Bob had declared him to be. He had been sending her abroad just to separate them and then, after she told him that he—Bob—was going also, he had trumped up the transparent excuse for keeping her in Harniss. Esther should realize that this was precisely what had happened. And, too, she must realize that if he—Bob again—did go alone, then Foster Townsend's underhand scheme would be working just exactly as he hoped. Surely it was obvious enough. She must see through it; she would, just as soon as she considered it calmly and deliberately.

He was surprised when he drove into the yard, to find the windows of his grandfather's room alight and to see the Denboro doctor's horse and buggy standing by the door. The Cook housekeeper met him when he entered. Mr. Cook's cold had grown suddenly worse, she told him, and the doctor seemed somewhat alarmed.

"You had better go right up, Bob," she said. "Mr. Cook's been askin' for you every other minute for the last two hours. He's frightened about himself—you know how he is when there's anything the matter with him—and he won't lay still or keep from frettin' unless you are there."

Bob stood watch beside his grandfather's bed until the old gentleman at last fell asleep. Dodging the questions of the querulous patient was the hardest part of the vigil. Elisha Cook was anxious to know where his grandson had been, why he kept going away and leaving him all alone like this—to die, for all he knew—and if he intended to keep on doing it until he went off to Europe and left him to die or not, just as it happened. Bob promised to remain at home that night and other nights for the present, at least. And he reluctantly dismissed all idea of disclosing his feeling for Esther until his grandfather should be well and strong once more. He would write her and explain the situation; that was all he could do now.

The next morning there was little change. Cook was no worse, nor was he appreciably better.

"He will get along," said the doctor, "provided he keeps still and doesn't try to get up, or worry about that lawsuit or anything else. You are the only person who seems to have any real control over him. If you can just stick around and fight off callers, lawyers especially, and see that he takes his medicine and eats what he should and when he should—if you'll just stay here with him for a week or two he will get over this upset. There will be others, of course. You know as well as I do that a man at his age is likely to—well, step off almost any time, but I don't think it is going to be this time. I am counting on you to hold the fort for me."

So Bob held the fort, but it was nearly a fortnight later before Elisha Cook was sufficiently recovered to permit his grandson's spending an evening elsewhere than in that house. Bob wrote two letters, one to Esther explaining why he could not come to see her, and one to the steamship company canceling his passage on the *Lavornia*. And during that fortnight many things happened in Harniss.

The Welfare Society decided to give a performance of "Pinafore" in the town hall. Among the native and summer population of the village and of Bayport and Orham, there were several individuals who sang well and a larger number whose singing was passable. The committee chosen to select the cast picked Esther Townsend for the part of *Josephine*. The vote was not unanimous. Mrs. Wheeler and a few intimate friends seemed to feel sure that Margery, the Wheeler daughter, was exactly suited for that part and should have it. There was much discussion, resulting in Margery's being given the part of *Little Buttercup*. "After all," Mrs. Wheeler confided to the Reverend Mr. Colton, "perhaps it is just as well. If Margery did sing *Josephine* the Townsend girl would have to be *Buttercup* and every one knows that she hasn't a bone of humor in her body. We should be willing to sacrifice the rights of an individual for the good of the whole, shouldn't we, Mr. Colton? And if Margery is *anything* it is self-sacrificing. She has a beautiful spirit."

Bob Griffin's name was mentioned in the discussion as a possible member of the cast, but, unfortunately, Bob could not sing. Then it was suggested that, as in the case of the Old Folks' Concert, he might be given charge of costumes and scenery. Mrs. Wheeler was firm on this point. "It is quite unnecessary," she declared. "The play book tells us exactly what the costumes should be and, if we really need scenery, we can hire a set in Boston. I see no reason for complicating matters by dragging Mr. Griffin into the affair. You know how fussy he was about the Old Folks' costumes. He won't be satisfied unless he can superintend everything and that will mean more time than we can spare. The first week in September is the very latest date when we may expect a good-sized audience; every one will be leaving directly after that. Besides, the story is that Mr. Griffin is going abroad soon to study art. I don't think we should interfere with anything as necessary as study for *his* art. Ha, ha!"

Some of the listeners to this decided expression of opinion exchanged side-long glances as they heard it. They remembered how very enthusiastic the Wheeler mother and daughter had formerly been concerning Griffin's services and ability. Mrs. Captain Ben Snow whispered to Mrs. Colton that she guessed Esther Townsend had put Margery's nose out of joint so far as Bob Griffin was concerned.

"That nose is where the shoe pinches just now," asserted Mrs. Snow. Mrs. Colton was aware of some peculiarities in the metaphor, but she agreed with the truth of the statement.

Who should play *Ralph Rackstraw* was the casting committee's most difficult problem and Fate solved it in an unexpected way. A stranger came to Harniss, a stranger who could sing, who had had much experience in amateur theatricals, and who in age and physical charm was the ideal Rackstraw. Best of all he had sung the part elsewhere and in a big city. Mrs. Wheeler declared his coming was a dispensation of Providence. Margery agreed with her. So, for the matter of that, did every female—especially every young female—in the cast.

At the first rehearsal the new *Ralph Rackstraw* made a hit even before he opened his mouth to sing. When he did sing the hit assumed the proportions of a triumph. Margery Wheeler's regret that she was not to play *Josephine* was bitterer than ever and her hatred of Esther Townsend more implacable.

Bob Griffin knew nothing of all this. Esther had written him, in her reply to his note, that a visitor was expected at the mansion, and he had heard rumors that Foster Townsend was entertaining some one from "out West," but he paid little attention. The sole dweller in that house in whom he was the least interested was Esther and he was looking forward to seeing her very soon. Elisha Cook was steadily improving in health and the moment his grandson received the doctor's permission to leave him for an evening that evening would find Bob Griffin knocking at the Townsend door.

Esther's letter, written the day following that upon which she received his note, was a long one. Its tone was kindly and, remembering only too well the manner of their parting, he found comfort in that. She expressed sorrow at the news of his grandfather's illness, but hoped, as he did, that it would prove neither serious nor prolonged.

"It is too bad that you were obliged to cancel your reservation on the *Lavornia*," she wrote. "Of course you will go on another ship and as soon as it is safe for you to leave Mr. Cook. I have not changed my mind in that matter at all, Bob. You must go, for your own sake. I shall insist upon it. I don't want to think that you were only pretending when you told me how you were counting upon the opportunity to study under the great masters there in Paris. I am sure some of the things I said to you the other night were too hard and they must have hurt you. I am sorry I said them and I have worried about them ever since. But I am just as sure as ever that you must not give up your chance simply because I have to give up mine. And I do want to have you tell me that you were wrong in saying what you did about Uncle Foster. If you could see him now, every day, as I see him, you would

know that he is as sorry as I—yes, or you—that our disappointment had to be. I have never known him to be so kind and indulgent. And he says so many nice things about you, too. I am glad enough that he will never know what you said about him. And, Bob, I want you to go abroad and study hard, not only for yourself, but—well, yes, for me. Nothing will make me so proud as to have you prove to him and every one else that you *are* a wonderful painter and will be famous some day. That will be worth working for—yes, and waiting for."

There was a postscript.

"I haven't told you a word of news, have I?" added Esther. "Well, there isn't much. The Welfare Society has decided to give 'Pinafore' in the town hall early in September and they have coaxed me into trying to play *Josephine*. She is the captain's daughter, you remember, and what I suppose you might call the heroine of the piece. The prospect frightens me rather, but I am going to try. Uncle seems to want me to and —well, Bob, it may help to keep my mind occupied during a part of the time when some one I am very much interested in is so far away. The other news is that we are expecting a visitor here at home. He comes from Chicago and is the son of an old friend of Uncle Foster's out there. I will tell you more about this—yes, and about everything, when you call. I hope that will be soon."

It was not soon, as Bob reckoned time just then, but at last the doctor admitted that his patient might be left in the care of the housekeeper without endangering the progress of his convalescence and the housekeeper herself persuaded Elisha Cook that his grandson needed at least one evening's rest.

"He has been shut up here for more than two weeks," she said, "and he ought to get a breath of fresh air. You go right out, Bob, and stay as long as you want to. There's one of those mesmerizin' men at the hall to-night and if I was you I'd go and see him. They tell me he's somethin' wonderful. Taylor Hadley told me that he saw this same man over to

Hyannis last week and the things he done were nothin' short of miraculous. He put a boy to sleep right on the stage and then stuck pins in him just as if he was a—a cushion or somethin'. Taylor said it was the funniest thing *he* ever saw. He laughed till he thought he'd die."

Old Mr. Cook stirred impatiently in the bed.

"*Must* have been funny, especially for the boy," he observed. "It isn't such a great trick to stick pins in people, seems to me. Bob doesn't need to go to the town hall for that. Suppose I stick a few in you right now, Sarah; then we can all have a good time."

The housekeeper did not accept the suggestion. She tartly explained that the boy was mesmerized and didn't know anything about it.

"Anyhow," she declared, "Bob doesn't have to go to the show unless he wants to. But he ought to go out somewhere. He needs the fresh air and exercise after bein' shut up in this house as long as he has."

"He hasn't been shut up in it any longer than I have. . . . Oh, well, well! never mind. Stop arguing, for heaven's sake! Where are you going, Bob?"

Bob thought he might go for a walk, or a drive, perhaps.

"Where are you going to drive?"

"Oh, I don't know. Perhaps over to Harniss, or thereabouts."

"Harniss! Humph! You go to Harniss a lot lately, seems to me. Can't paint pictures in the night, can you? . . . Oh, well, go ahead! go ahead! . . . Say, if you see Foster Townsend you tell him for me that he better be saving up his money. He's going to need a good many dollars to pay the bill the Supreme Court will hand him pretty soon. He, he! I'm going to get him this time and I only hope he's beginning to realize it."

The housekeeper cautioned him to be quiet.

"The doctor said you mustn't talk or even think about that lawsuit," she protested. "You want to get well, don't you?"

"Who said I wasn't going to get well? You don't suppose I'll be fool enough to die until I win that case, do you? . . . Oh, do shut up! Bob, go, if you want to. Don't stay too long, that's all. And come in here and see me when you get back. I'll be awake. Nobody is going to mesmerize *me* and stick pins in me. . . . Clear out!"

Bob "cleared out," glad of the opportunity to escape. The Cook horse never made better time than during that evening's trip to Harniss.

The Townsend maid—not Nabby Gifford, but the other—answered his ring and ushered him into the library. Esther was there and there was no doubt whatever that she was glad to see him. In her manner was no trace of the angry resentment with which she had bade him good-by two weeks before. Her letter proved that she had repented of her treatment of him that night and now, as her hand returned the pressure of his, his heart leaped joyfully. She was the most glorious girl in all the world and she was his. Nothing could ever part them. There should be no more misunderstandings.

Foster Townsend was in the library also, seated in the big leather chair. His greeting of the caller was an cordial as usual, no more so but no less. He did not rise, however.

"Hello, Griffin," he observed. "How are you? You're quite a stranger. Had sickness over at your house, I hear. Esther told me."

"Yes, sir. My grandfather has been under the weather. He is much better now."

Townsend did not say he was glad to hear it. He said nothing and, picking up his newspaper, proceeded to read. Bob accepted Esther's invitation to be seated and he and she exchanged casual comments on unimportant subjects. Bob was impatiently awaiting her uncle's leaving them alone together. He had always done this heretofore; now, however, he remained. A moment later he dropped his paper and spoke.

"Esther says you have had to put off your trip to the other side for a week or so," he said. "When are you going?"

Bob hesitated. Esther was regarding him intently and he was aware of her scrutiny.

"I—well, I don't exactly know, Captain Townsend," he replied.

"Humph! I see. That doesn't mean you aren't going at all, does it?"

"No, sir. No, I don't know that it does. I haven't made up my mind just what I shall do."

"Humph! Good deal of a disappointment this having to put it off must have been to you, I should imagine. I judged from what you said to me, and what Esther says you said to her, that going over there to learn to paint is the one thing you've wanted to do all your life."

"Yes, sir. Why—why, yes, it is."

"Um-hum. Then you'll go just as soon as you can, of course? Eh?"

Bob hesitated. Townsend bit the end from a cigar.

"Nothing to keep you here now that this sickness is out the way, is there?" he inquired, carelessly.

"Why—why, no sir. I suppose not."

"Glad to hear it. Looks like too good a chance for you to miss. Esther agrees with me there; don't you, Esther?"

Esther nodded. "He is going, of course," she said, quickly. "You are, aren't you, Bob?"

Bob was in trouble. He had come there fully determined to make one more plea to Esther's common sense and justice. He meant to make her understand how impossible it would be for him to leave her, how their separation would be precisely what her scheming uncle had hoped and for which he had planned. And now, in Foster Townsend's presence, he could not tell her that. And this cross-examination was placing him in a very bad position. If he said that he was not going until she did the fat would be in the fire. If he said that he was going without her, she would accept that statement as the promise she had demanded. He did not know what to say.

"Bob," persisted Esther, "I asked you a question. Didn't

you hear it? You are going abroad now—very soon—aren't you?"

He set his teeth. He must make some sort of answer.

"I— Oh, I—I don't know exactly what I shall do," he stammered. "Grandfather's sickness has—he isn't very well and—and perhaps I shouldn't leave him, for the present."

Esther was silent. Foster Townsend stretched his legs and jingled the change in his pocket.

"I see," he observed, in a tone of understanding solicitude which made Bob long to choke him; "that's it, eh? Well, now that's the right way for you to feel and it's gratifying, these days, to find young folks so thoughtful of their elders. What does—er—what does your grandfather say about it? Thinks you had better stay at home, does he?"

"I haven't talked with him about it yet. Not since he was taken sick."

"Oh, haven't you? Well, you will, of course. And when you do I guess likely he will tell you to go just the same. A friend of mine here in Harniss met your Denboro doctor yesterday and he says the doctor told him that Cook would be as well as ever inside of a week. He wanted you to go in the first place, didn't he?"

"He was willing I should go."

"Then I guess he will be just as willing now. From what I hear he thinks the world of you and he wouldn't let you do anything that would hurt you any more than you would do anything to hurt him. No, nor Esther here would to hurt me; eh, Esther? . . . But there, your business isn't mine, as I know of. Hello, here's Seymour! You two haven't met yet, I guess."

The hall door had opened and a young man entered the library. He was a dark-haired, dark-eyed young fellow, with good looks far beyond the ordinary, and he was dressed in a summer suit of light gray which fitted perfectly and was very becoming.

Foster Townsend rose from the easy-chair.

"Esther and I have been wondering what had become of you, Seymour," he observed. "Been for a walk, have you?"

The young man smiled, showing teeth as perfect as the rest of him.

"I went to the post office, that's all, Captain Townsend," he said. "I tried to coax Esther to go with me, but she wouldn't."

"Guess she was expecting a caller, maybe. Anyway, she has got one. Esther, suppose you do the introducing."

Esther colored slightly, but she accepted the suggestion.

"Bob," she said, "this is Seymour Covell, from Chicago. He is visiting us. You remember I—" She paused, noticing the expression upon the two faces. "Why!" she cried, in astonishment. "What is it? Do you know each other?"

It was quite evident that they did. Griffin had risen when Covell entered. He was gazing at the latter in incredulous surprise. And Covell, when he turned to face Bob, seemed quite as much astonished. The hand which he had extended dropped at his side. Of the two, he appeared the more taken aback by the meeting.

"*Do* you know each other?" repeated Esther. "You look as if you did."

Seymour Covell's embarrassment, if he was embarrassed, was but momentary. The hand shot forward again to seize Bob's and shake it heartily. His handsome face beamed.

"Well, well!" he declared, with a delighted smile, "this *is* a surprise! Griffin, who on earth would have expected to find you down here! How are you, old man? Glad to see you!"

Bob's gladness was more restrained. He accepted the handshake, but he did not return it, and his smile seemed, so Esther thought, somewhat forced. He looked from her to Covell and back again.

"Why, how are you, Covell?" he said. "Where did you come from?"

Covell laughed. "From Chicago. Chicago is my home port. That is the proper seafaring way to put it, isn't it, Cap-

tain Townsend? . . . But the last time I saw you, Griffin, was in New York. What are you doing in Harniss, Massachusetts?"

Bob shook his head. "Harniss, or next door to it, is where I belong," he answered. "This is my home port. But I—well, it is the last port I ever expected to find you in."

Foster Townsend interrupted. "Here, here!" he ordered. "Come up into the wind a minute, you two. Seymour, I didn't know you and this boy had ever met before. What is this all about, anyway?"

Covell explained. He was quite at ease now. "Griffin and I are old friends," he said. "We were fellow students at what we used to call the 'Art Abattoir' in New York. That is, he was a real student and I was—well, what can you honestly say I was, Griffin? Say it for me, will you? I am ashamed to try."

The laugh which accompanied the speech was infectious. Foster Townsend laughed, too, and so did Esther. Bob also attempted a laugh, but it was not a huge success.

"I guess you were as much of a student as I was," he said, rather awkwardly. "But what I can't understand is why you are here—in Harniss."

"And in this house" was the thought in his mind, although he did not utter it. Esther answered the unspoken question.

"Seymour is visiting us," she put in. "He is that son of Uncle Foster's old friend, the one I wrote you about. Don't you remember I said we were expecting a visitor?"

Bob did remember it, although it had made little impression when he read her letter. If she had told him that vistor's name he would have remembered. He remembered many things about Seymour Covell.

"I am an invalid, Griffin," Covell himself explained cheerfully. "You may not think it to look at me, but I am. I am down here for my health and my health and I are having a grand old time of it so far, thanks to the captain—and Esther. I believe the idea is that eventually Captain Townsend is to

put me to work somewhere at something or other, but just now I am an invalid, strong enough only to enjoy life and sing in light opera. Esther is responsible for the opera part of it. On her head be it. She knows most of our audience personally, provided we have an audience—and I don't, so I shall be the most care-free sailor that ever spliced the main brace. Is 'splicing the main brace' correct, Captain Townsend?"

Foster Townsend, with a chuckle, declared it sounded all right to him. It was evident that his visitor had already captured his fancy. Esther, who had been watching Bob intently, now spoke.

"The Welfare Society has persuaded Seymour to take the part of *Ralph Rackstraw* in our 'Pinafore' play," she said, quickly. "It is ever so kind of him to do it and I am sure I don't know what we should have done if he had refused. There is nobody else in town, or near it, who can sing that part as it should be sung."

Covell lifted a hand in protest. "Between you and me, Griffin," he said, with a doubting shake of the head, "that 'care-free' business I boasted of is all counterfeit. I am shaking in my shoes. These good people don't know what they have been let in for. By the time I get to the place in that performance where I announce that I 'go to a dungeon cell,' I'm betting that the audience will be perfectly satisfied to have me go there, provided I don't come back. Oh, Josephine!" with a laughing glance at Esther, "I am sorry for you!"

Esther laughed, too, and declared that she was not afraid. Townsend chuckled. Bob Griffin's smile was more than ever a product of main strength and determination. He had seen at least a half dozen performances of "Pinafore"—in those days every child on the street knew the most of it by heart—and he remembered only too well the love scenes between *Rackstraw* and the captain's daughter. He and Seymour Covell had never been friends during their studio days in New York. They were acquaintances, that was all, and never once during

that acquaintanceship had he hailed Bob affectionately as "old man" or expressed delight in meeting him. Bob recalled very distinctly a certain air of condescending amusement in the Covell attitude toward him and the other fellows who took their work in deadly earnest. Covell had talent, too. When he cared to take the trouble he could draw or paint well; but he seldom cared. He had been a favorite with the instructors, with members of his own crowd—chaps who, like himself, were fond of a good time and were liberally supplied with money—and the girls adored him, even the uncomely ones upon whom he wasted little attention. There was always a cluster of femininity about the Covell drawing board when the day's lesson was over.

And there were stories about him. He had the reputation of being a lady-killer and, if the stories were true, a ruthless one. Of all the men on earth this Seymour Covell was the very last whom Bob Griffin cared to see in Esther Townsend's company, and the thought of his holding her in his arms and singing love ditties in her ear—even "in public on the stage"—was unbearable. He was living in the same house with her; he had made himself a favorite there already, just as he always did wherever and whenever he cared to try. Captain Townsend liked him immensely, that was plain enough. Yes, and Esther liked him, too. She ought to have more discernment. She ought to see the sort of fellow he was.

Bob Griffin was an even-tempered young man and as sensible as the average, but he was young and head over heels in love. The manner in which Covell appealed to Esther and hinted at understandings and confidences between them made him furious. He was jealous, and growing more so every minute.

There was further conversation among the four, although Covell did the most of the talking. He was curious concerning Bob's progress with his painting; much interested in the beach studio, and proclaimed his intention of visiting it some day soon.

"Griffin has the gift; we all used to tell him so," he de-

clared. "He will go far, that was the general prophecy among the crowd at the old Abattoir. I was one of the loudest prophets."

Which was a lie and Bob was strongly tempted to tell him so. But Foster Townsend put in a word.

"Griffin is going far now," he announced. "He is sailing for Paris in a week or so to keep on with his painting over there."

Covell said he was delighted. "First rate," he exclaimed. "Just what you ought to do. The old Quarter is the place to find out what is what."

Bob remembered something he had heard.

"Seems to me," he began. "Why, yes, didn't I hear that you went over there yourself, Covell? Some one told me you had studied in Paris."

Again Covell favored the trio with that pleasant laugh of his.

"Oh, yes!" he admitted, "I was there for awhile. Plugging along pretty well for me, too, and enjoying it. But the old health machine lost a cog or something and the doctors sent me home again. The toughest break of luck I ever had, that was," he added, with a shrug. "Well, maybe I shall have another chance by and by. I hope so."

Townsend grunted in sympathy and Esther said she was sure he would have that chance.

"We are all so glad Bob is to have his," she added.

Foster Townsend rose to his feet. "Well, come on, Seymour," he ordered. "Let's you and I go out and see Varunas for a spell. I want you to go around the Circle with me behind Claribel to-morrow. You haven't seen her do a mile yet and it is high time you did. The mare is growing older, like the rest of us, but she can make some of the trotters around here carry all the sail they can spread and fall astern—even now."

They left the room together, Covell pausing to shake Bob's hand once more and express his pleasure at their reunion. Left alone—something Griffin had become to believe was not likely

to happen that evening—he and Esther faced each other. His expression was somber enough. She, too, seemed a little uneasy.

"Isn't it nice that Uncle Foster has some one with him at last who will take an interest in his trotting horses," she said. "I used to pretend to, but he soon found out it was only make-believe. Seymour really does like horses; any one can see that he does."

Bob sniffed. "He used to have the name of liking anything that was fast," he said; and was immediately sorry that he had said it. Esther looked at him.

"Now what do you mean by that?" she queried.

Bob hesitated and then replied that perhaps he had not meant anything in particular.

"Why didn't you tell me he was here?" he added. "How long has he been with you in this house?"

"Why, I don't know; ten days or so. How could I tell you before? I haven't seen you for more than two weeks. And I wrote you in my letter that we were expecting some one."

"You didn't tell me his name."

"Why should I? I didn't suppose the name would mean anything to you. I hadn't the least idea that you knew each other. . . . Bob, what is the matter with you this evening? I never saw you so queer. When Uncle Foster was asking you about going abroad you scarcely answered him. And you were almost rude to Mr. Covell. The way you glared at him! I am awfully afraid he noticed it; I don't see how he could help it. I was ashamed of you. What is it all about?"

He was glowering at that moment, not at her, but at the carpet.

"He seems to have made himself mighty popular in his ten days," he observed, bitterly. "Look here! *Is* he going to take part with you in that 'Pinafore' thing?"

"Certainly he is. The committee were at their wits' end to know who to pick for the *Ralph Rackstraw* part. His

coming was the luckiest thing that ever happened. He sings well and he has had lots of experience in amateur theatricals. And he was so nice about it. He didn't want to take the part, here, among strangers. . . . What did you say?"

He had muttered an inaudible something. A thought came to her.

"Why, Bob," she cried, "you're not cross because you weren't invited to take part, are you? You don't sing. You refused to sing even in the chorus at the Old Folks' Concert. And we—I mean the committee—seemed to think it wasn't necessary to have any one select the costumes this time; the books tells us just what to wear. You mustn't feel slighted. I never supposed for a minute that you would."

He shook his head impatiently. "Of course I don't feel slighted," he declared. "That doesn't amount to anything."

"Then what is it? Why are you so grumpy? I never saw you act so before."

He frowned. "Esther," he blurted, after a moment of indecision, "I don't like this business at all. I don't like it."

"What business?"

"Having this fellow here in the house with you, going everywhere with you and—and, well, I don't like it."

She gazed at him in incredulous astonishment. Then she laughed merrily.

"Bob!" she exclaimed. "Why, Bob Griffin! You are not jealous, are you? You are not silly enough to be *that*."

He was precisely that, but of course—perhaps for that very reason—he hotly denied the accusation.

"Of course I'm not jealous," he declared. "Don't be foolish, Esther. . . . And don't laugh either. There is nothing to laugh about."

She tried her best to obey, but the laugh still lingered at the corner of her lips. She leaned forward to take his hand.

"Bob!" she said, reproachful. He drew his hand away.

"I don't like his being with you," he insisted. "I don't like it at all. He ought not to be here."

"But I can't help his being here, can I? He is uncle's visitor, not mine. And his father was one of uncle's best friends years ago. And so, when old Mr. Covell wrote—"

"Oh, never mind! I don't care how he got here. He isn't the sort of fellow you ought to be with. And I don't want you to take part in that 'Pinafore' play with him."

"But I must take part. I have promised that I would. Bob, don't be so unreasonable. . . . Why do you say that he isn't the sort of fellow I should be with? What makes you say that?"

"Because it is the truth. He is a—well, he is—oh, he isn't your kind, that's all."

"What does that mean? What is my kind?"

"You know well enough. He is— Oh, I won't talk about him behind his back!"

"But you have talked about him. You have said too much or not enough, one or the other. Why don't you like him? He likes you. He said you and he were friends there in New York."

"He lied when he said it. He never had anything to do with me. He and his gang were too busy high-rolling to bother with a fellow who was there just to study painting. He had a pocketful of money and— Why, Esther, if you knew half of the stories I have heard about him you wouldn't like him any better than I do."

"What sort of stories?"

"Oh—well, I'm not going to tell them to you. They aren't stories you ought to hear."

"Do you know they are true?"

"Why shouldn't they be true? Everybody said—"

"I don't care what every one said. People say all sorts of things, especially when they are envious of other people. Do you know they were true?"

"No-o. At least I never *saw* anything out of the way, if that is what you mean. Why should I? I never was invited

to any of his—parties. He hadn't any use for me; I told you that."

"Yes, you did tell me. You didn't like him then and you don't like him now and so, because you don't like him, you sit here and hint—hint at things that, for all you know, may have been just mean gossip without a word of truth behind them. Rich people are always gossiped about. I have lived with Uncle Foster long enough to learn that. . . . Bob, if you can't prove anything against Mr. Covell I think it would be much better for you not to talk about him at all."

Her temper was rising now. If his own had not been at the boiling point he might have noticed the symptoms and been more careful. But he was past taking care.

"I tell you this," he cried, determinedly: "If you think I am going off to Europe and leave you here with him you are very much mistaken. *That* much is settled, anyhow."

She rose to her feet.

"Do you mean that you don't trust me enough to—to leave me with anybody?" she demanded.

"I mean that I won't leave you with him. I should say not! With him—and with that uncle of yours standing behind him, helping him play his cards and—and. . . . Oh, Esther, think a little bit! Can't you see that getting this Covell here is just a part of your uncle's whole scheme? Get me out of the way, send me across the water, and—well, then maybe, with this chap around to help you forget, you will forget. And everything will be all serene for Foster Townsend. Not much! I wasn't going before—I told you so—and if I wouldn't then I certainly shan't now. I'm not an absolute fool. Why—"

She broke in upon the tirade. "Wait!" she ordered. "Wait, before you say anything more. Does this mean that when you came here to-night you intended telling me that you weren't going to do what I had asked; that you weren't going abroad unless I did?"

"Until you did—yes. Oh, Esther," with a sudden outburst of tenderness, "don't look like that and don't speak like that—

to me. How could I go? If you knew how hard I had tried to make myself see that I ought to do what you asked! But I couldn't! I *know* I shouldn't go. I came to beg you not to insist on it. And I haven't seen you for so long, two whole weeks! I have looked forward to to-night— Oh, dearest, please! Let's not quarrel again. Let's—"

He came toward her. She stepped back.

"Don't!" she cried. "Don't! I— Oh, I can hardly believe all this! It doesn't seem possible that it is you who have said such things. The last time you were here, when you said what you did about Uncle Foster I—well, after you had gone I tried to find excuses for you. I knew you were disappointed and—well, I was sure you didn't mean what you said and would tell me so when we met again. And now, instead of that, you say the same things—or worse. So you did mean them, after all."

"Well—well—oh, hang it all! Esther, I said—I said what I believed—yes. And I believe it now."

"Then you believe my uncle is a scamp and a hypocrite and a liar—and I don't know what beside. You believe that!"

"I didn't call him a liar. But I do believe all this keeping you at home and telling me that I ought to go is just a part of his scheme to separate us. Yes, and I believe you think it is, too—or you would if you weren't so loyal to him and would let yourself think honestly. . . . I won't say that he has lied, exactly, but—"

"Why not? You have called Seymour Covell a liar. Not to his face—oh, no! But behind his back—to me."

"Well—I—"

"That is enough. I don't want to hear any more. Not a word."

"But, Esther—"

"No. I have learned a great deal to-night. You paid no attention to my wishes. You say yourself that you had no intention of promising what I asked, even when you knew it was as hard for me as it could be for you, and that I asked it

just for your sake. And then—as if that wasn't enough—you let me see that you are going to stay here because you don't trust me out of your sight."

"I do. I didn't say—"

"Yes, you did. Well, you may do as you please. And I shall do as I please. Good night."

"Esther—"

"Good night."

He held out his arms. Then, as she made no move nor spoke, the temper, which he had fought so hard to conquer, got the better of him again.

"All right," he said, turning. "All right, then. I said I wasn't a fool. I was wrong, I guess; I have been one, even if I'm not now. You care a whole lot more for your old scamp of an uncle than you do for me, and you can order me out and let this Covell stay. . . . I have learned a few things myself this evening. . . . Good night!"

He strode from the room and, a moment later, the front door of the Townsend mansion closed behind him.

This time the parting was absolute, irrevocable, final; they were sure of it, both of them. And they were too angry to care—then.

CHAPTER XVI

FOSTER TOWNSEND was noticing a change in his niece's manner and behavior. The change, it seemed to him, dated from the evening when Seymour Covell and Bob Griffin renewed their acquaintanceship in the library, when they met in his own and Esther's presence. At least, if not that evening, then certainly the next morning. Prior to that, for two weeks or more, she had been, he thought, unusually grave and quiet, and at times in her manner toward him there was—or he fancied there was—a certain constraint which he did not understand. He did not question her concerning it; that troubled conscience of his made him not too eager to press an understanding. She could not have learned from Jane Carter the real reason why her European trip had been given up. He had sworn the Carter woman to secrecy and her obligation to him was too great to allow her to risk dropping a hint to Esther in the letters which the latter occasionally received.

Nevertheless there was something wrong. He thought it quite probable that, as Griffin did not call, the pair might have had a falling out. Soon, however, he heard of Elisha Cook's illness and Bob's absence was explained. The telegram announcing Seymour Covell's visit, followed by the prompt appearance of that young man at the Townsend mansion took his mind from other matters and he ceased to wonder concerning Esther's odd behavior. Then, all at once, her behavior became still more odd, although in an exactly opposite way, and was again forced upon his attention.

From the morning following the Griffin call—a surprisingly short one it had seemed to him considering their fortnight's separation—her gravity and preoccupation disappeared. Now she very seldom went to her room to remain there alone for

an hour or more. She was with him or with Covell the greater part of every day and in the evenings. She was always ready to sing or play when asked and from being but passively interested in the "Pinafore" production she became very eager and seemed to look forward to each rehearsal. These rehearsals were almost nightly as the date of performance drew near, and between times *Josephine* and *Rackstraw* spent hours practicing their scenes together in the parlor at or beside the piano. And Bob Griffin came no more to the house.

Esther's attitude toward Seymour Covell had changed also. When he first came she was pleasant and agreeable when in his company, but she never sought that company. In fact, her uncle was inclined to feel that she kept away from it as much as she politely could. There was no doubt whatever that Covell sought hers. From the moment of their introduction he had sought it. During his first meal at the Townsend table he, as Nabby told her husband, repeating what the maid had told her, looked at Esther "a whole lot more than he did at what was on his plate."

"Did she look at him as much as all that?" Varunas had asked.

"I didn't hear. I don't know's I'd blame her much if she did. He's worth lookin' at. Handsome a young feller as I've ever set eyes on. I don't know's I shan't be fallin' in love with him myself," Nabby added, with a surprising affectation of kittenishness.

Varunas seemed to find it surprising enough. He looked at her for a moment and then turned on his heel.

"Where you goin' now?" his wife demanded.

"Down street—to buy you a lookin' glass," he retorted and slammed the door.

This new change in Esther affected her relations with the visitor. She avoided him no longer. They were together a great deal, although, to be entirely honest, he was still the pursuer. Foster Townsend was not wholly satisfied with this condition of affairs. He liked young Covell well enough;

for the matter of that it would have been hard not to like him. As Covell, Senior, wrote in his first letter, he possessed the knack of making people like him at first sight. Varunas, crotchety as he very often was, liked him immensely, although he refused to admit it to his wife, who was continually chanting praises.

Townsend was a good judge of men and prided himself upon that faculty, so, although he found his friend's son agreeable, witty, a fascinating talker and the best of company, he reserved his decision concerning what might lie beneath all these taking qualities until he should come to know him better. As he would have expressed it, he wanted time to find out how he "wore." There were some objections already in his mind. He expressed one of them to Varunas, with whom he was likely to be as confidential as with any one except his niece—or, of course and at times, with Reliance Clark.

"He's almost too good looking," he said. "I never saw one of those fellows yet—one so pretty that he looked as if he belonged in a picture book—who wasn't spoiled by fool women. There are enough of that kind in Harniss who would like nothing better than the chance to spoil this one; that is plain enough already. And he doesn't mind their trying—that is just as plain."

Varunas nodded. He had half a mind to repeat a few stories he had heard. There was Margery Wheeler, people were saying that she was making a fool of herself over young Covell, although they did say that he paid little attention to her. And there was a girl named Campton, whose family lived on the lower road, not far from Tobias Eldridge's home, who was pretty and vivacious and who bore the local reputation of being a "great hand for the fellows." She had a passable voice and was one of *Sir Joseph Porter's* "sisters or cousins or aunts" in the "Pinafore" chorus. She and Seymour Covell were friendly, it was said. Mrs. Tobias Eldridge was responsible for the report that he had been seen leaving the Campton cottage at a late hour. Mrs. Eldridge confided to a bosom friend that, from

what she could make out, he didn't come to that cottage very early either. "Saw Esther home from rehearsal first and then went down to Carrie Campton's without tellin' anybody; that's my guess, if you want to know," she whispered. "But for heaven's sake don't say *I* ever said such a thing. Course it may not be true, but Tobias himself saw somebody he was sure was him comin' out of their front door at twelve o'clock last time he went to lodge meetin'. Last time Tobias went, I mean."

The bosom friend had imparted this confidence, as a secret not to be divulged, to another bosom friend, and, at last, some one had whispered it to Varunas Gifford. Varunas was tempted to tell the story to his employer, but decided not to do so. It might stir up trouble; you never could tell how Cap'n Foster would take a yarn of that kind. He would be just as likely as not to declare it was all a lie, and no one's business anyhow, and give him—Varunas—fits for repeating it. And, after all, it *was* no one's business—except Seymour's. Young fellows were only young once and Carrie Campton was "cute" and attractive. Varunas cherished the illusion that when he, himself, was young he had been a heartbreaker. And he liked Covell. So he said nothing about the rumored philandering.

The advance sale of seats for the "Pinafore" production had exceeded all expectations. And the evening of the performance brought to the town hall the largest audience it had ever held, even larger than that attending the Old Folks' Concert. Miss Abbie Makepeace, who contributed the Harniss "locals" to the *Item,* sat up until three o'clock the following morning writing rhapsodies concerning the affair. She used up the very last half inch of space allotted to her and interesting jottings like "Our well known boniface Mrs. Sarepta Ginn will close her select boarding-house and hostelry on the fifteenth of the month for the season as usual" were obliged to be put over for another week. Abbie's whole column was filled with naught but "Pinafore." "I never supposed there could be anything

else as important as that happen in *this* town in one week," she explained to Reliance Clark the next day. "If I'd ever expected—but, my soul, who *could* expect such a thing!"

Varunas made no less than three trips from the mansion to the hall that evening. His first passengers were Esther and Seymour Covell, who, being performers, were obliged to be on hand early for dress and make-up. The next occupants of the rear seat were Foster Townsend and Captain and Mrs. Benjamin Snow. The Snow carryall was in the paintshop and Townsend had invited them to ride with him. Nabby and the maid were the third load. It was not until the Giffords were in their seats at the hall that Varunas found opportunity to ask the question which was in his mind.

"Nabby," he whispered, "is anything the matter between Seymour and Esther? Have they had a fallin' out or anything?"

His wife turned to look at him. "What makes you ask that?" she whispered, in return.

"The way they acted all the time I was drivin' 'em down here to-night. Never hardly spoke a word to each other, they didn't. That is, she never. He set out to once or twice, but she scarcely so much as answered him. Anything happened that you know of?"

She shook her head. "They was that way all through supper," she said. "Cap'n Foster noticed it, too. The hired girl said she suspicioned somethin' was up, so I made an excuse and went into the dinin' room myself. They was mum as a deef and dumb asylum when I was there and I see the cap'n watchin' 'em and pullin' his whiskers the way he does when he's bothered. I couldn't make it out. They were sociable as could be at dinner time and I heard 'em singin' their songs and laughin' in the parlor afterwards. Whatever happened must have been after that, that's sure."

Varunas nodded. "Oh, well," he observed philosophically, "probably 'tain't nothin' much. They'll get over it. Young fellows and girls are always squabblin' when they're keepin'

company. Huh," with a chuckle, "I remember one time when I was sparkin' around with—" He paused and changed the subject. "There's Cornelius Gott, struttin' in," he said. "Goin' to lead the music, they tell me. Got his funeral clothes on, of course. He gives me the creeps, that feller does. When I think of all the folks he's helped lay out—Godfreys!"

Mrs. Gifford ignored the talented Cornelius.

"Why didn't you finish what you was sayin' first along?" she demanded, tartly. "Who was this one you used to spark around with? I don't recollect ever hearin' about her afore."

Her husband shifted on the settee. "Oh, nobody, I guess," he muttered. "I was just talkin'."

"Humph! *I* guess 'twas a nobody, too. Nobody that was anybody would have done much sparkin' with you."

"Is that so? Well, I never noticed you lockin' the door when I used to trot around three times a week. . . . Oh, well, there, there! let's don't fight about what can't be helped—I mean what's past and gone. If Seymour and Esther have had a rumpus probably 'twon't last long. . . . I don't know, though; she's pretty fussy. All the Townsends are hard to please. You've got to step just so or they'll light on you. Look how that Griffin boy was hangin' around; and now where is he? Don't come nigh the place."

Nabby sniffed. "*He* never amounted to anything," she declared. "I knew perfectly well Esther'd hand him his walkin' ticket when she got ready. Mercy on us, Varunas Gifford, you ain't puttin' old 'Lisha Cook's grandson in the same barrel with Mr. Covell, are you?"

The overture began just then and the curtain rose soon afterward. The group of tars adjacent to the rickety canvas bulwarks of the good ship "Pinafore" announced that they sailed the ocean blue, taking care to obey orders and not lean against those bulwarks. They welcomed their gallant captain, who in turn informed them that he never swore a big, big D. Abbie Makepeace glanced anxiously at the Rev. Mr. Colton when she heard this, but, as he was smiling, she decided

it might be proper to smile a little, too. *Rackstraw* and *Josephine* and *Dick Deadeye* and *Sir Joseph* and all the rest made their entrances and were greeted with applause. The performance swung on, gaining momentum and spirit as the performers recovered from stage fright. The voice of the prompter was heard not too frequently and none of the scenery fell down, although it suffered from acute attacks of the shivers. A great success, from beginning to end.

But, whereas at the Old Folks' Concert, Esther Townsend had scored the unquestioned hit of the evening; on this occasion her triumph was shared by another. If, as *Josephine,* she was applauded and encored and acclaimed, so also was Seymour Covell as *Ralph Rackstraw.* If some of the mothers and fathers in that hall could have read the minds of their daughters while that handsome sailor was on the stage, they might have been surprised and disturbed. Covell was entirely at ease. There was no awkwardness or stage fright in his acting or singing. His voice rang strong and true, he played his part with grace and dash, and when in the final chorus, arrayed in the glittering uniform of a captain in the Royal Navy, he clasped *Josephine* in his arms and tunefully declared that the "clouded sky was now serene," even the demurely proper Miss Makepeace was conscious of a peculiar thrill beneath the bosom of her black silk. The fascinating young gentleman from Chicago was before, as well as behind, the footlights the hero of the performance.

Esther, in spite of the applause and encores, the floral tributes and the praise of her associates behind the scenes, was conscious that she was not doing her best. Even in the midst of her most important scenes she found her thoughts wandering miserably. Memories of the happy evening of the concert kept intruding upon her mind. When the bouquets were handed her by Mr. Gott she accepted them smilingly, but with no inward enthusiasm. Her uncle's floral tribute was even more beautiful and expressive than on the former occasion and from her Aunt Reliance came a bunch of old-fashioned posies which were

lovely and fragrant. A magnificent cluster of carnations bore the card of Seymour Covell. She scarcely looked at them; she and Mr. Covell had had an unpleasant scene in the parlor that afternoon. He might not have meant to be presuming—he had protested innocence of any such intention and had contritely begged her pardon—but she was not in a forgiving mood. It had been a horrid day and the evening was just as detestable. She cared little for the approval of her friends and nothing whatever for the flowers they gave her. There were no tea roses among them. Bob Griffin was not in the audience. She had looked everywhere for him but he was not there. There was no reason why he should be, of course. Considering the way he had treated her he would have been brazen indeed to come.

She bore the congratulations and handshakes as best she could, but she whispered to her uncle that she was very tired and begged to be taken home as soon as possible. The Snows were left at their door and she and Foster Townsend and Nabby and Varunas rode back to the mansion together. Seymour Covell remained at the hall. He had promised to help in the "clearing up." He suggested that he be permitted to walk home when the clearing up was over, but to this Captain Townsend would not consent. "Varunas will drive back for you," he said. An argument followed, for Covell insisted that he might not be ready to leave for two hours or more and Gifford must not be kept from his bed so long. It ended in a compromise. Varunas was to drive the span to the hall once more, hitch the horses in one of the sheds at the rear, and return to the mansion on foot.

"By the time you're through, Seymour," declared the captain, "you won't want to do any more walking. You'll be glad enough to ride. It won't do the horses any harm to stand in the shed a warm night like this."

Esther went to her own room, almost immediately after her arrival at the big house. She was too weary even to talk, she told her uncle. Townsend announced his own intention

of "turning in" at once. "No need for any of us to sit up for Seymour," he added. "I told Varunas he needn't, either. Seymour will do his own unharnessing. He is handy with horses and he'll attend to the span; he told me he would."

So, within an hour after the fall of the final curtain, the Townsend mansion was, except for the hanging lamp burning dimly in the front hall, as dark as most of the other houses in Harniss. The lights in the town hall were extinguished just before midnight. The rattle of the last carriage wheel along the main road or the depot road or the Bayport road died away. From the window of the bedroom in their house on the lower road Mr. Tobias Eldridge peered forth for his usual good-night look at the sky and the weather.

"Clear as a bell," announced Tobias. "Never see so many stars in my life, don't know as I ever did. Lights things up pretty nigh much as moonlight."

"Oh, come to bed," ordered his wife, who was already there. "I never see such a man to sit up when there wasn't any need for it. I'll bet you there ain't another soul wastin' kerosene along this road from beginnin' to end. Do put out that lamp."

Her husband chuckled. "You'd lose your bet," he observed. "There's a light in the Campton settin'-room. I can see it from here. Carrie ain't home yet, I guess. Say, she looked mighty pretty up there on the stage to-night, didn't she?"

Mrs. Eldridge sniffed. "She done her best to look that way," she said. "Paint and powder and I don't know what all! If I was her folks she'd be to home before this, now I tell you. Put out that *lamp!*"

Tobias obeyed orders. "Women are funny critters," he philosophized. "You are all down on Carrie because she is pretty and the boys like her. Next to Esther Townsend she was the best-lookin' girl in that show to-night. I heard more than one say so, too."

"Umph! More men, you mean. I don't doubt it. Well, handsome is that handsome does, but men don't never pay attention to *that*. There's no fool like an old fool—especially

an old man fool. Well, you're in bed at last, thank goodness! Now let's see if there is such a thing as sleep."

If Tobias had been permitted to remain longer at the window, and if he had looked up the beach and away from the village instead of down the road leading toward it, he might have noticed another yellow glare flash into being behind the dingy panes of a building not far from his post of observation. He would have been surprised and perhaps disturbed to the point of investigation had he seen it, for the building was his own property; this light came from the bracket lamp in Bob Griffin's "studio" beyond the low point, facing the sea.

Esther had been wrong when she decided that Bob was not in the town hall during the performance of "Pinafore." He had made up his mind not to go near the place. He had no wish to see her under such conditions. He tried to convince himself that he never wished to see her again—anywhere, at any time. She had treated him abominably. She had led him on, had encouraged—or, at least, had never discouraged—his visits and his society. She must have guessed that he was falling in love with her; surely it was plain enough. And then, when circumstances had forced from him avowal of that love, she had not—no, she had not resented it. She had even allowed him to think that his affection was, to an extent, returned. And she had been glad when he announced his intention of joining her in Paris. And then—oh, he must not think of the happenings since then!

Well, he was through with her forever. Absolutely through. He could go to Paris now with a clear conscience. His grandfather was practically well again and he might go when he pleased. Yet so far he had made no new reservations nor set a date for his departure. To be away, far away, where he could not see her or hear of her ought, considering everything, to have been an alluring prospect—but it was not.

On the evening of the opera he had remained with his grandfather until the latter's early hour for retiring. Then he came downstairs and tried to read, but soon threw down his

book and went out. He harnessed the horse to the buggy and drove out of the yard with no definite destination in mind. The horse, perhaps from force of habit, turned east along the main road. Later that main road became the main road of Harniss. By that time Bob had decided to go to the town hall—never mind why; he, himself, was not certain. He left the horse and buggy at the local livery stable. It was after eight when he climbed the steps of the hall. The curtain had risen and there was "standing room only," so the ticket seller told him. He crowded in behind a double row of other standees at the rear of the ranks of benches and remained there, looking and listening, to the bitter end.

It was bitter. When she made her first entrance and smiled in pleased surprise at the applause which greeted her, he began to suffer the pangs of self-torture. The sight of her, beautiful, charming, the sound of her voice, the zest with which she played her part—all these were like poisoned arrows to him. If she had shown the least evidence of the misery she should have felt, which he was feeling—but she did not. To all outward appearance she was happy, she was enjoying herself. She had forgotten him entirely. And the tender looks which she bestowed upon Seymour Covell as her sailor lover were altogether too convincing. Those love scenes which Bob had resentfully remembered when she told him Covell was to play *Rackstraw* were far worse in their portrayal than in his fancy. A dozen times he was on the point of leaving the hall, but he did not leave; he remained and saw and suffered. Furiously jealous, utterly wretched, he stood there until the curtain fell. Then he hurried out into the night, eager to get away from her, from the crowd, from everybody—from his own thoughts, if that were possible.

It was not, of course. At first he started toward the stable where he had left the Cook horse and buggy. Half way there he changed his mind and, leaving the main road, turned down the lower road until he came to the beach. He was in no hurry to get back to Denboro. His grandfather was sure to

be awake and expecting him and ready for questions and conversation. He would have to tell where he had been and, if he mentioned the "Pinafore" performance, that would have to be described in detail. He simply could not talk about it now, that evening, and he would not. The memory of the final tableau, with Esther and Covell in close embrace, was—was— If he could only forget it! If he could forget her!

He tramped the beach for miles in the starlight. At last, suddenly awakening to a realization of the distance he had traveled, he turned and walked back again. He endeavored to dismiss the evening's torture from his mind and to center his thinking upon himself and what his own course should be. The sensible thing was to go abroad at once. He would go. Then, having clenched his teeth upon this determination, he immediately unclenched them. . . . To go and leave her with her scheming uncle had been bad enough, but to leave her with this other fellow, who was, of course, just one more pawn in the Townsend game, that was the point where his resolution stuck and refused to pass.

He came opposite his beach studio and, acting upon a sudden impulse, unlocked the door and entered. He lighted the bracket lamp and sat down in a chair to continue his thinking, and, if possible, reach some decision. It was as hard to reach there as it had been during his walk. Covell—Covell—Covell! For *that* fellow to marry Esther Townsend! Yet, on the other hand, why not? Handsome, accomplished, fascinating—the son of a millionaire! And backed by the influence of the big mogul of Ostable County! What chance had Elisha Cook's grandson against that combination? If Esther had ever really loved him—Bob Griffin—then— But she did not. She had thrown him off like an old glove. Then, in heaven's name, *why* was he such a fool as to waste another thought on her?

He rose from the chair determined to sail for Europe by the next steamer. He blew out the lamp, locked the door, and started, walking more briskly now, in the general direction of the livery stable. Still thinking and debating, in spite of his

brave determination, he had reached a point just beyond the Campton cottage on the lower road when he heard a sound which caused him to awaken from his nightmare. A thick clump of silver-leaf saplings bordered the road at his left and in their black shadow he saw a bulk of shadow still blacker, a shadow which moved. He walked across to investigate.

As he came near the shadow assumed outline. A two-seated carriage and a pair of horses. He recognized the outfit at once. The horses were the Townsend span and the carriage the Townsend "two-seater." He could scarcely believe it. What on earth were they doing there, on the lower road, at this time of night—or morning?

The idea that the span might have run away, or wandered off by themselves, was dispelled when, upon examination, he found them attached by a leather hitching strap to the stockiest of the silver leaf saplings. This, of course, but made the puzzle still harder to answer. Who had brought them there? Varunas alone; or Varunas acting as driver for Foster Townsend? But, if Townsend had come to one of the few houses on that part of the road, where was Varunas, who would, naturally, remain with the horses? And if Varunas had come alone—why? And there was no dwelling within fifty yards of that spot.

Bob turned and looked up the road. The nearest house was that occupied by Henry Campton, father of Carrie Campton whom Bob knew slightly and had seen that evening in the "Pinafore" chorus at the town hall. The Campton cottage was on the other side of the way, but its windows were dark. He turned to look in the opposite direction and as he did so, he heard, from somewhere behind him, a door close softly. Turning once more, he saw a figure walking rapidly toward the spot where the span was tethered.

Bob started to walk away and then hesitated. He was curious, naturally. If the person approaching was Captain Foster Townsend he had no wish to meet him; but if, as was more probable, the person was Varunas Gifford then he was tempted

to wait and ask what he was doing there at two o'clock in the morning. So he remained in the shadow by the carriage. It was not until the newcomer was within a few feet of him that the recognition came. The man who had come out of the Campton house was neither Townsend nor Gifford, but Seymour Covell.

Covell did not recognize Bob. It was not until the latter moved that he grasped the fact that there was any one there. Then he started, stopped and leaned forward to look.

"Who is that?" he demanded, sharply. Bob stepped out from the shadow.

"It is all right, Covell," he said. "Don't be alarmed."

Covell did not, apparently, recognize him even then. He stood still and tried to peer under the shade of the Griffin hatbrim.

"Who is it?" he repeated, his tone still sharply anxious.

Bob pushed back the hat. "Griffin," he answered. "It is all right. Nothing to be frightened about."

Covell took a step toward him. "Eh?" he queried. "What—? Oh, it is you, is it! I couldn't see." Then, after a moment, he added: "What are you doing here?"

The tone in which the question was put was neither pleasant nor polite. There was resentment in it and suspicion, so it seemed to Griffin. He was strongly tempted to counter with an inquiry of his own, for surely his presence at that spot at that time was not more out of the ordinary than Seymour Covell's. His explanation was easy to give, however, so he gave it.

"Nothing in particular," he replied. "I have been down at my shanty, the one I use as a studio, and I was walking back when I saw these horses standing here. I wondered, at first, whose they were and then why they had been left here at this time of night. So I stopped for a minute to investigate, that is all."

The explanation was complete and truthful, but Covell seemed to find it far from satisfactory.

"Humph!" he grunted, still scrutinizing Griffin intently and

with a frown. "That is all, is it? You weren't here for any particular reason, then?"

"No. Why should I be?"

"I don't know why you should. I can't see that you need be concerned with these horses. Nor why they were left here or who left them, for that matter. What business was it of yours?"

"Not any, I suppose. It seemed a little odd, considering the time. When I saw whose horses they were I couldn't imagine why Captain Townsend or his driver had come to this part of the town so late. I never thought of you. . . . Good night."

He turned to go, but Covell detained him.

"Wait!" he ordered. "Say, look here, Griffin, there are a good many odd things about all this, seems to me. I want to know why you— Say, where is this place you call a studio?"

"A quarter of a mile up the beach. Why?"

"Do you usually spend your nights in it?"

"No."

"You live in—what is it?—Denboro, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then you are a long way from home, I should say. . . . Yes, and with a damned poor excuse, if you want to know."

Bob did not answer. The fellow's tone and manner were offensive and, disliking him as he did and with his own temper set on a hair trigger just then, he thought it best to leave before the interview became a quarrel. He turned to go, but Covell caught him by the shoulder.

"No, you don't!" he declared. "You don't get out of it like that. I want to know why you are hanging around here in the middle of the night."

Bob shook the grip from his shoulder.

"What is the matter with you, Covell?" he demanded, angrily. "Don't speak to me like that."

"I speak as I please. Now then, out with it! What are you doing here?"

"I told you. For the matter of that, what are you doing here, yourself? . . . Not that I care what you do, of course."

Covell's fists clenched. For an instant Bob thought he was going to strike him. He did not, however. Instead he laughed, mockingly.

"Oh, no, you don't care, do you?" he sneered. "You don't care a little bit. I could see that when we met that night at the Townsends'. Well, I haven't met you there since, I'll say that much."

It was Bob who narrowed the space between them. His step brought them face to face.

"Covell," he said, deliberately, "you are drunk, I suppose. That is the only excuse I can think of for you. Well, drunk or sober, you may go to the devil. Do you understand?"

"I understand *you* all right, Griffin. And I understand why you are hanging around, trying to find out what I do and where I go. I can understand that well enough. You cheap sneak!"

Bob scarcely heard the epithet. It was the first part of the speech which brought enlightenment to his mind. At last he understood, as he might so easily have understood before if he had had time to think. Involuntarily he glanced over his shoulder at the Campton cottage.

"I see!" he exclaimed. "Oh, yes, yes! I see. . . . Humph!"

Covell had noticed the look and its direction. He raised his hand.

"By gad!" he cried, his voice rising almost to a shout. "I'll—"

He sprang forward, his fist upraised. Bob, by far the cooler of the two, seized the lifted arm and held it.

"Hush!" he whispered. "Hush, you fool! There is some one coming."

Some one was coming, was almost upon them. If they had not been so absorbed in their own affairs they would have heard the step minutes before and might have noticed that it

had paused as if the person, whoever he or she might be, had stopped to listen. Now the steps came on again and the walker, a man, appeared on the sidewalk opposite. He was evidently looking in their direction.

"Hello!" he hailed, after a moment. "Who is that? What's the matter? Anything?"

Bob answered. "No. Nothing is the matter," he said.

"Oh! I didn't know but there might be. . . . Say, who are you, anyhow?"

There was no reply to this. The man—his voice, so Bob thought, seemed familiar although he could not identify it—took a step forward as if to cross the road. Then he halted and asked, a little uneasily: "You're out kind of late, ain't you?"

Again it was Bob who answered. "Why, yes, rather," he said, as calmly as he could, considering the state of his feelings. "We're all right. Don't let us keep you. You are out rather late yourself, aren't you?"

In spite of its forced calmness the tone was not too inviting. The man stepped back to the sidewalk.

"Why—why, I don't know but I be," he stammered, a little anxiously. After another momentary pause he added, "Well, good night," and hurried on at a pace which became more rapid as he rounded the other thicket of silver-leaves at the bend just beyond. He passed out of sight around its edge. Bob, who had been holding the Covell arm during the interruption, now threw it from him.

"There!" he said, between his teeth. "Now go home, Covell. Go home. Unless," with sarcasm, "you have more calls to make between now and breakfast time. At any rate, get away from me. I have had enough of you."

Covell did not move. He was breathing rapidly. "You low down spy!" he snarled. "I'd like to know whether you are doing your spying on your own account or whether you were put up to it. . . . Well," savagely, "I'll tell you one thing; your sneaking tricks won't get you anywhere with—with the

one you are trying to square yourself with. You can bet your last dollar on that."

And now it was Bob who sprang forward. Just what might have happened if Covell had remained where he was is a question. Bob was beyond restraint or words. His impulse was to give this fellow what he richly deserved and to do it then and there.

But Covell sprang backward. Not with the idea of avoiding battle—he was no coward—but to find space in which to meet it. His leap threw him against the fore wheel of the Townsend carriage and the shock almost knocked him from his feet. The nervous horses reared and pranced. The wheel turned.

"Look out!" shouted Bob, in alarm.

The warning was too late. Covell fell—fell almost beneath the plunging hoofs. A moment later, when Griffin dragged him from their proximity, he was white and senseless, an ugly gash in his forehead.

CHAPTER XVII

FOSTER TOWNSEND was, ordinarily, a sound sleeper. Possessed of a good digestion, he seldom lay awake and seldom dreamed. In the small hours of the morning following his return from the "Pinafore" performance his sleep was disturbed. Just what had disturbed it he was not sure, but he lay with half-opened eyes awaiting the repetition of the sound, if sound there had actually been. He did not have to wait long. "Clang! Clang! Clang!" There was no doubt of the reality now. Some one was turning the handle of the spring bell on the front door of the mansion.

He scratched a match and looked at his watch on the table by the bed. The time was after two o'clock. Who in the world would ring that bell at that hour? And why?

He did not waste moments in speculation. Rising hurriedly he lit the lamp, pulled on his trousers and thrust his bare feet into slippers. Then, lamp in hand, he opened the door leading to the upper hall. The bell had clanged twice during his hasty dressing. He had not been the only one to hear it. There was a light in Esther's room, and its gleam shone beneath her door. From behind that door she spoke.

"Uncle Foster!" she called. "Uncle Foster, is that you? What is it? What is the matter?"

Before he could reply Nabby Gifford's shrill voice sounded from the far end of the passageway leading to the rooms in the ell.

"Is that you, Cap'n Foster?" quavered Nabby, tremulously. "Are you awake, too?"

Townsend, halfway down the stairs, grunted impatiently, "Do you think I'm walking in my sleep?" he growled. "Don't be frightened, Esther," he added. "I guess likely it's Seymour ringing the bell. He must have forgotten his key."

He opened the heavy front door and, holding the lamp aloft, peered out. At first the darkness and the lamplight in his eyes made it impossible to distinguish the identity of the person standing upon the step. Then the person spoke and he recognized the voice. It was Bob Griffin, white-faced and very grave.

"Captain Townsend—" began Bob.

The captain interrupted.

"Eh? You!" he exclaimed. "Why, what in thunder—?"

Bob did not let him finish. "Seymour Covell is out there in the carriage," he explained, quickly. "He is hurt. Badly hurt, I am afraid."

"Eh? Hurt? . . . What do you mean?"

"I mean he is unconscious. One of the—one of your horses kicked him in the head. If some one can help me carry him into the house—"

Townsend waited to hear no more. He put the lamp upon the table and darted to the stairs.

"Varunas!" he roared. "Varunas! Turn out and lend a hand here. Lively!"

Heedless of the scantiness of his apparel he ran down the walk to the carriage. On the rear cushions of the "two-seater" lay Seymour Covell, white and senseless, his head bound with a blood-stained handkerchief.

"Good Lord A'mighty!" groaned Townsend. "Here, you and I can manage him, Griffin, I guess. You take his feet. . . . Varunas! Where in thunder *is* Varunas?"

Varunas came tumbling down the steps at that moment. His attire was even more sketchy than that of his employer. He and the captain and Bob lifted the limp figure from the seat and bore it up the walk. At the door Esther met them. Nabby was in the hall. Mrs. Gifford, in a calico wrapper and curl papers, would have been a sight to behold, if any one had thought of looking at her.

They carried Covell up the stairs to his own room and laid him on the bed.

"Get his clothes off, somebody," ordered Townsend. "You, Nabby—that's your job. Varunas, you go and get the doctor. *Hurry!*"

Bob caught the bewildered Gifford before he could leave the room.

"I called for the doctor on my way," he said. "He told me to bring Covell here and he would be around in five minutes. Is there anything else I can do—now?"

Townsend shook his head. "I guess not," he said. "Good Lord! Good Lord! What will his father say to me for letting this happen? . . . And it was one of my horses that kicked him, you say? I never knew them to do such a thing before. When did it happen? Where did it happen?"

Bob's answer was a little vague, although no one seemed to notice the vagueness—then.

"Down below here along the road," he said. "When I picked him up he was lying almost under their feet. . . . Oh, here is the doctor!"

The physician came panting into the room. His appearance shifted the center of interest from Griffin and the latter was, to say the least, relieved. He remained long enough to hear the result of the hasty examination. Covell's injuries were grave, although by no means necessarily fatal. There was concussion of the brain, how serious could not yet be determined.

Bob, after asking once more if there was any way in which he might be useful and receiving but the briefest and most absent replies, left the room. "I think I may as well go now," he told Esther. "I shall only be in the way."

She had followed him to the hall. Now she put her hand upon his arm and descended the stairs in his company.

"No one has thanked you for bringing him home, Bob," she said. "We are all grateful, you know that. And, of course, you understand—"

"Yes," hurriedly. "Yes, certainly. Good night."

"Just a minute, please. Bob, how did this happen? Where

was he? And where were you—so late? How did you happen to find him?"

These were the very questions he had begun to hope he might escape, for that night at least. That they would have to be answered somehow, and at some time, he realized only too well, but what his answers should be he had not yet decided. And he must have time in which to consider. In spite of the shock to his nerves, in spite of the difficulty of thinking of anything except the terrible thing which had happened, he had thought sufficiently to realize a little of the problems confronting him. If he could only get away from that house without being subjected to cross examination then—well, then he might be able to make up his mind as to how much of the truth should be told. So far as he was concerned he had nothing to hide; but there were others—so many others.

And now here was one of these others—the very one whose name must be kept out of this miserable mess—*must* be—regarding him anxiously and repeating the questions he dreaded.

"Bob," she urged, "why don't you tell me? Where did it happen? Why were you the one to find him?"

He answered without looking at her.

"Oh, I don't know," he said, hurriedly. "It just happened, I guess. I will tell your uncle all about it by and by, of course. You mustn't wait now. They may need you upstairs. Good night."

"But, Bob, where had you been? Where were you?"

"Oh, I had been down to the shanty—to the studio. I had something there to attend to. My own horse is at the livery stable and I was walking toward the stable when I saw the span standing by the side of the road. I went over and looked."

"Beside what road? The stable is at the corner of the lower road, and your studio is on that road. If you were coming—Bob, were the span and—and Seymour on *that* road? Was that where it happened?"

"I mustn't stay. They need you, I know. Good night."

"But, Bob, how could he have been away down on the lower road? With Uncle Foster's horses? Why—Bob!"

But he was hurrying to the gate. She stood for a moment, looking after him. Then she closed the door and hastened up the stairs.

At Harniss breakfast tables that morning the performance of "Pinafore" at the town hall was the topic of discussion. By dinner time, however, "Pinafore" was forgotten entirely, for a new sensation had pushed it to the background and taken its place in the limelight. Seymour Covell, the rich young fellow from Chicago, Foster Townsend's guest, the one to whom so many people were referring as "Esther Townsend's new beau," had met with an accident. One of the Townsend horses, one of the famous span, had kicked him in the head, or the ribs, or somewhere—had kicked him, anyhow—and he was dead, or dying, or sure to die before long. And Captain Foster had said— No, it was Varunas Gifford who said it— Or Nabby— Well, at any rate—and so on.

Before the day ended all the guessing and surmising had simmered down to a few unquestioned facts. Seymour Covell had been kicked by a Townsend horse, he was unconscious, had remained so ever since it happened, and Doctor Bailey, and the other doctors who had been summoned by telegraph from Boston, were very much worried about him and were considering taking him to a big Boston hospital where they might have to perform an operation. Oh, yes! and it was Bob Griffin, Elisha Cook's grandson from Denboro, who had found him dying by the side of the road, had lifted him, "all alone by himself, just think of it!" into the two-seater and driven him home to the mansion.

So much was sure and certain, but there was so much that was uncertain—and curious. No one seemed to know just where the accident happened. Covell had been almost the last to leave the town hall. The very last, except Asa Bloomer, the janitor, so it was said. And that was just before midnight. Now some one had been told by some one, who had been told

by Captain Ben Snow, who got it from Foster Townsend himself, that Bob did not bring Seymour Covell home until after two in the morning. Where had Covell been all this time? It was scarcely possible that he had lain unconscious beside the main road for two hours, without either the span or the two-seater or himself having been seen by any one. "Why, Asa Bloomer never left that hall until after one and then he walked right straight up the main road. *He* never saw nothing out of the way, says so himself, he does."

And it was particularly strange that Bob Griffin should have been the one to find the injured man. Several people had seen Bob at the rear of the hall during the opera. Where had *he* been from eleven until almost two? Queer enough that he and Covell could drop out of sight so completely. Griffin—witness the testimony of the livery stable keeper—had left the Cook horse and buggy at the stable; they were there at twelve-thirty when the stable man went to bed, leaving the door unlocked as was his custom. In the morning they were gone, so Griffin must have come for them some time or other.

Another day and there were new rumors, queerer still. Bob was located and interviewed. "He was down there, in that shanty of Tobe Eldridge's, paintin' those picture things of his just as if nothin' had happened." At least a dozen Harniss citizens had dropped in to ask questions. They were given little satisfaction. Griffin told them only the barest details. He furnished the answer to the puzzle concerning his whereabouts between the hours of eleven and one-thirty by saying that he had spent them in that very studio. He happened to remember something he had left there; he was rather vague about this. Walking to the village he had noticed the Townsend equipage by the roadside. "Where?" "Oh, up by the corner." He had found Covell lying stunned and bleeding, and had taken him home. Then he went back to the stable and drove his own horse to Denboro.

"Why did you lift him into that carriage all by yourself?" asked one persistent visitor. "Should have thought you'd have

run somewhere for help or somethin'." Bob replied that he guessed he had not thought of it. The interviewers departed not entirely satisfied. "He ain't told the whole story. Holdin' somethin' back, that young feller is," was the consensus of opinion.

One of the callers at that studio the second day after the accident was Foster Townsend himself. Bob was not surprised to see him there. He knew that Seymour Covell's host would not be satisfied with hearsay particulars, but would, sooner or later, seek first-hand information and that he—Bob—must be ready to supply it.

He had had time to consider his problem and to reach certain definite conclusions. When, on that fateful night, or morning, he had dragged Seymour Covell from beneath the horses' hoofs, his first impulse was to run to the nearest house for help. But the nearest house, the only house in that immediate vicinity, was that belonging to Henry Campton. Covell had, but a little while before, come from that house. A dim light was burning even yet in one of its upper windows. If Covell were taken there, if people learned that it was opposite that house the span had been left standing—well, the whole story, or *a* story, exaggerated and maliciously twisted, would spread from one end of the town to the other. Bob knew Carrie Campton slightly, knew her to be something of a rattlehead and very much of a flirt, but to risk subjecting her name and reputation to the innuendoes and wicked sneers of the gossip of Harniss seemed to him too mean to consider, if there was another alternative.

And even then, as he stood there, with Covell lying senseless and bleeding at his feet, there was forced upon him the realization that far more than this must be considered. There were other names—his own, of course, but he was in it and must go through with it somehow. He was bound to be talked about. But Esther Townsend must not be. No one knew of the accident yet—no one save himself—and Covell, if the latter should ever know anything again in this world. No one

else knew where it happened, nor of the quarrel leading up to it. They must not know. He was quite aware of the local sensation which his frequent calls at the Townsend house had caused. And since those calls ceased and Esther was seen so much in Seymour Covell's company, sly hints had been dropped in his presence to the effect that the visitor from Chicago had "cut him out." If he should tell the whole truth, of the meeting with his reputed rival and their quarrel—why—No, the truth must not be told, nor must any one discover it. So he had dismissed all idea of seeking help, had lifted the unconscious man to the carriage seat and driven carefully and quietly away. It was not until he turned the corner and was safe upon the main road that he began to hope the secret—the dangerous portion of it—might remain undiscovered.

The story he intended telling Foster Townsend was to be a combination of truth and what he considered justifiable falsehood. The truth dealt with his decision to go to the studio, his stay there and his leaving just before two. And this he did tell without hesitation.

"But what in the world brought you down to this forsaken roost in the middle of the night?" asked the captain.

"Oh, I don't know. I had a few things to see to here. And —well, I didn't feel like going home, right away. It does sound ridiculous, I admit, but it is true."

Foster Townsend rubbed his beard. He had learned of Griffin's presence at the hall and he could imagine what the young man's feelings must have been during the performance. He had long since made up his mind that Bob and Esther had quarreled that evening after he and Seymour Covell left them together in the library and, because it had broken off the highly undesirable friendship between the two, he was glad. It was sure to happen some time. His niece was a Townsend, and therefore possessed of the Townsend quota of common sense, and he had never really believed she could feel any sincere affection for a "Cook." The break was inevitable and it had providentially come in time to cancel the necessity for

the "plain talk" he had intended having with her had the intimacy continued. And, because Griffin was no longer a pestiferous nuisance to be reckoned with, so far as Esther and his plans for her were concerned, he was inclined to be tolerant with the young fellow—yes, even a little sorry for him.

"Um-hum," he said, reflectively. "I see. You came down here to be alone and—well, sort of think things out. Is that it?"

Bob glanced at him in surprise. "Why—yes," he admitted. "That was just it."

"Did you think 'em out?"

"I don't know. . . . Yes, I suppose I did."

"When are you going over across?"

"Oh, pretty soon. In a week or two, probably."

"I see. . . . Well, I am glad to have you tell me that. Glad you are going to be so sensible."

It was this short speech which changed the entire complexion of the interview. It was the wrong thing to say just then. In the Townsend tone there was—or so Bob fancied—a note of quiet satisfaction, the serene contentment of the player who has won the game just as he intended and expected to win it. Griffin had meant to be very diplomatic and tactful with his meddlesome visitor. He would tell his carefully constructed story tersely and end the conversation as quickly as possible. Now he forgot all this. The temptation to let this triumphant, condescending trickster know that he had seen through his trickery from the beginning got the better of his judgment. He spoke the thought that was in his mind.

"Yes!" he muttered, with sarcastic emphasis. "I have no doubt you are."

"Eh? What's that? . . . Why, yes, of course I am. It is what you ought to do."

Still the condescension and the note of triumph. The last atom of Bob's restraint vanished.

"It is what you want me to do, I know that," he said, sharply. "It is what you planned to have me do all along."

Foster Townsend leaned back in the chair. His keen eyes narrowed.

"Humph!" he grunted. "Now what do you think you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean. Oh," with bitter contempt, "what is the use of pretending you don't?"

There was a moment of silence. Townsend threw one knee over the other.

"Look here, young man," he said, sternly and deliberately. "As long as you've said so much, maybe we might as well have a clear understanding. If you mean that I am just as well satisfied to have you and my niece three or four thousand miles away from each other—if that is what you mean, then you are right. I am. Nothing but trouble for both of you could ever have come of your—well, getting too friendly. That is just as sure as that we are here in this shanty this minute."

Bob would have retorted hotly. He had much to say and now he meant to say it. But his visitor lifted a hand.

"Wait," he ordered. "When you say that I planned to separate you, you are right there too, dead right. And you can believe this or not—I made those plans not altogether on account of Esther. I was thinking of you. Not quite as much, maybe, but some. . . .' Here, here! now hold a minute more. Let me tell you what I mean. I haven't got anything against you in particular. You're a decent enough boy, I guess. You are a Cook and I have had all the dealings with Cooks that I care to in this life, but there was more than that. If you weren't any relation to your grandfather I should still put my foot down on you and Esther getting to think too much of each other. She is my niece, just the same as my daughter, and when she marries—as I presume likely she will some day—she will marry a man who is good enough for her, who amounts to something already and will amount to a whole lot more."

Bob broke in.

"Some one like Seymour Covell, I suppose," he suggested, with a sneer.

For an instant Townsend's eyes flashed. Then he smiled grimly and shook his head.

"I don't recollect that I mentioned that name," he said. "I am not mentioning any names yet. There is time enough; Esther's young. I didn't come here to talk about my private affairs either, but, as we are talking, I'll say my say. You never were the man for her, and you never will be. The thing for you to do is to forget her, go to Paris or wherever you want to, and make yourself into as good a picture painter as you can. And—this was what I started to tell you in the beginning—I don't know that I may not be willing to help you do it. I don't know any one in Paris, as it happens, but I have some good friends who do, who know some influential people over there. If I say the word they will give you letters of introduction. There may come a time when you'll need help—even a little extra money maybe. Well—there you are."

Bob was staring at him incredulously.

"Do you mean you would lend me *money?*" he gasped.

"I said perhaps those letters would fix it so you could get money if you needed it."

"And—and you think I would take money from *you*?"

"Money is a handy thing to have, no matter where it comes from. There, there! keep your feet on the ground. Keep cool."

Bob's face was crimson. He forgot that he was addressing the great Foster Townsend, the big mogul of Harniss, forgot diplomacy, the difference in their ages, everything.

"Why—why, confound you!" he sputtered. "What are you trying to do; buy me off? Did you think I would—"

"Ssh! I have no idea of buying you off. I don't need to, so far as that goes. I was trying to do you a good turn, that's all."

"Good turn! Look here, Captain Townsend! I'll tell *you* something now. It isn't your smart scheming and underhand planning and all the rest of it, that is sending me to Europe. That hasn't influenced me in the least. No, nor it wasn't

Esther's telling me I ought to go, either. I knew perfectly well where I ought to be and that was right here where I could block the little game you and—and—that other fellow were playing. If she—if I hadn't found out from her—and from no one else—that—that—"

He paused. He was saying far more than he should and he realized it.

"Oh, well!" he ended, scornfully. "What is the use? I don't want your letters or money or any other favors. I am going away. Let that satisfy you. It ought to."

He turned his back upon the caller. Foster Townsend rose to his feet.

"All right, Griffin," he said. "Your business isn't mine, of course. Now, then, there is something which *is* my business, in a way, and before you put me off on the other tack we were talking about it. I'd like to have you tell me just where it was you found Seymour the other night. We are going to take him up to the Boston hospital in a day or so—to-morrow maybe—and his father will meet us there. He will want particulars. Where was he when you found him?"

Here was where Bob's story was to have begun its deviation from the truth. He had intended saying that he came upon the span, and Covell, at a point on the main road just beyond the livery stable. Now there was no such idea in his head. Why should he lie to this man? He would not.

"What difference does it make where I found him?" he said. "I did find him and I brought him home. That is all I care to tell about it."

Townsend rubbed his beard. "Humph!" he observed. "So that's all, eh? Why?"

"Because—well, because I choose to make it so."

"That's kind of funny, seems to me. Griffin, there is a lot of whispering going about; did you know it? From what I hear you haven't told any one the whole story. Don't you think you had better tell it to me?"

"No."

"Well, if you won't I don't see how I can make you."

"You can't."

"Humph! What is it you are so anxious to hide? If you shut up this way I shall think you are hiding something, of course. And so will everybody else."

"Let them think what they please. There is nothing *I* am ashamed of in it. I will say that much."

"Um-hum. Then there *is* something shameful for somebody; eh?"

"Captain Townsend, I have told you all I shall ever tell any one. And," earnestly, "if you take my advice you will be satisfied and do your best to keep the town satisfied with that much. One of your horses kicked Covell in the head. It was an accident and no one in particular was to blame for it. There! that is the last word I shall say now, or any other time. Good day."

Foster Townsend's hat was in his hand, but he did not go. He was obviously perplexed and troubled.

"Griffin," he said, after a momentary pause, "there was a queer yarn going around town this morning. A mighty queer one. I didn't take any stock in it, and I wasn't going to mention it to you because I thought it was too foolish to bother with. But now, since you won't answer a question, won't tell a thing, and from the hints you've dropped—I—well, I don't know."

"Hints! I haven't dropped any hints."

"Oh, yes, you have. You dropped one or two, without meaning it, I guess—to Esther the morning when you brought Seymour home. She was worried and told me about them. She couldn't make out why, if, as you said, you were going to get your horse at the livery stable, you went by that stable and up along the main road and found Seymour and the span there. She says when she asked you that you didn't answer. It made her believe that you didn't find him by the main road at all, but somewhere down along this road—the lower road. Well, to be honest with you, I shouldn't wonder if she

was right. I don't believe that span and two-seater could have stood alongside the main road very long, in plain sight, without somebody seeing them. It was after one when Asa Bloomer walked right along that road beyond the stable and *he* didn't see them."

He waited for an answer. Bob was silent.

"Well," continued Townsend, "what I should like to know is why Seymour was on this road. I can see why you were here, of course. Where was it you did find him? Come!"

Bob stubbornly shook his head. "I have told you—" he began, but the captain interrupted.

"You've told me nothing," he snapped, impatiently. "And you won't tell more; eh?"

"No."

"Well, you are foolish. This story that is going around is queer. I don't know where it comes from, nobody seems to know, but there is talk that you and Seymour were seen down here on this very road that night, long after the show was over, and that you and he were—well, next door to fighting. Having some sort of a row, anyway. Have you heard anything like that? . . . Humph! No, I guess you haven't, by the way you look."

Bob's face was white. The thing that he had dreaded, had feared might possibly happen, had happened. Ever since that fateful morning, amid his imaginings and forebodings had loomed large the figure of the man, whoever he might be, who had passed along that lower road and interrupted the quarrel between Covell and himself. If that man had recognized them— Bob tried to hope he had not done so. In fact, by this time he had begun to believe that the darkness had prevented recognition on both sides of the road. Now—

He fought to regain composure, even attempted a laugh, but it was a poor attempt.

"Nonsense!" he cried. "Why—what—who says such a fool thing as that?"

"I don't know who said it first. . . . There is nothing in it, then?"

"It is silly! It is ridiculous."

"Um-hum. All right. I'm glad to hear you think so. I shall try to pin the yarn down, of course, and when I locate the liar I'll shut him—or her—up. . . . Well, haven't changed your mind? You won't tell me any more?"

"No."

"Sorry. Good-by."

He put on his hat and left the building. Bob stared after him for one miserable moment. Then he sat down in the chair his inquisitor had vacated and, with his head in his hands, tried again to look the situation in the face. It had been sufficiently complex before. Now it was quite hopeless. Why—oh, why, had he lost his temper? Why had he not told the story he had meant to tell and then stuck to it, through thick and thin? His word would have been as good as any one else's. Now he had let Foster Townsend see that he was hiding something. Townsend would not be satisfied until he learned the whole truth. Lies, no matter how stubbornly persistent, would not help now. This other story was already in circulation. This man—and who was he?—had recognized him and Covell. He must have heard a part, at least, of their quarrel.

And Esther—had Townsend intimated that her name had been mentioned? He could not remember that he had, but it made little difference. All Harniss would assume they were fighting over her. And if, by any chance, the name of the Campton girl was dragged into the affair, that would only make matters worse. They would say that he—Griffin—had followed Covell to the Campton house, had played the spy, hoping thereby to injure his rival in Esther's eyes, and—and—what wouldn't they say? Why, they might even go so far as to disbelieve the entire story of the accident, to say that it was not an accident at all, but that he, Bob Griffin, had inflicted the injury upon Seymour Covell. They might. And if Covell never regained consciousness, if he died without speak-

ing, who could prove that the accusation was not true? Even Esther, herself, might believe it.

His imagination formed a picture of the court room at Ostable, himself in the prisoner's dock, Esther in the witness stand and a sharp lawyer cross-examining her, dragging forth every detail of their relations with each other; asking—

No, she should not be subjected to that. It made little difference what they thought of him. And the reputation of the Campton girl no longer counted. If Esther Townsend's name could be left out, he would tell the whole truth and face the music. But to tell that whole truth was unthinkable. She *had* been the cause of the quarrel.

He thought and thought, pacing the floor, racking his brains for a satisfactory solution and finding none. The sole ray of light in the darkness centered upon his going away, going far away where he could not be questioned. The problem as to whether or not he should go abroad was settled then and there. He would go at once, on the very next ship, if possible. They would talk about him, of course, but no matter for that. They could only guess and, after a time, they might get tired of guessing. Or Covell might recover and tell whatever he pleased. The chances were that he, too, would leave Esther's name unmentioned.

Bob drove back to Denboro with his mind made up. He and his grandfather had a protracted and stormy session that evening. In spite of charges of ingratitude and selfishness in being in such a hurry to leave "the only relation you've got on earth"; in spite of a guilty conscience which partially confirmed those accusations, Bob's determination was not shaken. At last Elisha Cook ordered him to go and be hanged. "Though why you are in such a tearin' rush all at once I'll be blessed if I can see," he added. "What *is* the matter? Come now! why not tell me?"

Bob shook his head. "I can't now, grandfather," he said. "I will tell you, or write you, some day. You will just have to

take my word that I have a reason and—well, don't feel too hard against me, that is all."

The story, or rumor of a story, to which Foster Townsend had referred, sprang from no one seemed to know just where. Tobias Eldridge appeared to be the first to have heard it, but Tobias refused any information. "It just dropped my way by accident," he said, "and 'twan't any more than a hint, as you might say. I don't know any particulars and, to be real honest, I don't want to know any. I shan't say another word. Wished I hadn't said nothin'. It's 'most likely all lies anyhow; and I ain't hankerin' to be sued for libel. No sir-ee! I don't know nothin' and the next feller that asks me will find I've forgot even that."

But the whispering continued and the next forenoon when Esther returned from an errand downtown she called her uncle into the library. Young Covell was to be taken to the Boston hospital on the afternoon train. His condition was no worse, in fact it was a trifle more encouraging. During the previous night he had momentarily regained consciousness, had muttered a word or two. Doctor Bailey was less pessimistic than at first, but insisted that the sooner his patient reached the hospital when, if necessary, an operation could be performed, the better. The doctor was to accompany him, so also was the nurse and Captain Townsend. The latter was busy and disinclined to talk, but his niece persisted.

"I won't keep you but a minute, Uncle Foster," she pleaded; "but I do want to ask a question. When you went to see Bob yesterday there at his studio, what did he say to you?"

Her uncle was fidgeting by the door. "I told you what he said," he replied. "You don't want to hear it all over again."

"You didn't tell me much of anything. You didn't seem to want to talk about it."

"Eh? . . . Oh, well, there wasn't anything to talk about. . . . Good Lord!" irritably, "what are you so particular about that fellow for? Haven't you had enough of him? Look at the mess he's got us all into."

She looked at him. "Why, Uncle Foster!" she cried indignantly. "How can you say such a thing as that? It was he who brought Seymour home that night. If it had not been for him— Uncle Foster, what do you mean? Have you heard anything more—anything new about the accident? Tell me, have you?"

The tone in which the question was asked caused him to glance at her. Her eyes were fixed upon his face and he noticed that her clasped hands were trembling.

"No-o," he replied, with a shake of the head. "Nothing that you need to worry about, anyway."

"Have you heard *any*thing?"

He pulled his beard. "I've heard enough silly talk to make a sailing breeze for a thousand-ton ship," he grumbled. "I didn't pay any attention to it and you mustn't either."

"Have you—has any one said anything to you about—oh, about Seymour and—and Bob Griffin having been seen that night somewhere down on the lower road together?"

He frowned. "So it has got around to you, has it?" he observed, impatiently. "Yes, yes; I've heard that lie. There is nothing to it. Nobody knows where it comes from and no one can find out. When I get time I'll run it into the ground and stamp on the snake that started it. But it is just one more fool yarn. Forget it, Esther. . . . Now don't bother me any more. I've got a hundred things to do between now and train time."

She realized the truth behind this exaggerated statement, but she was far from satisfied. There was so much more she would have liked to ask.

"Then he—Bob, I mean—didn't say anything to you about— He didn't tell you any more particulars at all?"

"No."

"What did you talk about? You were there such a long time. I was waiting for you to come back and—"

These persistent inquiries angered him. Apparently she had not entirely lost interest in this Griffin, after all.

"He didn't tell me anything I didn't know already," he declared, brusquely. "And I told him a few things myself. Now you behave like a sensible girl and put him out of your mind. That is what I want you to do, and it is what I expect of you. If you want to think of somebody, think of poor Seymour. God knows he is entitled to your thinking, just now."

She asked no more questions and, for the next few hours, she did try to think of Seymour Covell. But after the stretcher, with its white and still occupant, had been brought carefully downstairs, after it had been just as carefully placed aboard the wagon which was to carry it to the railway station, after the commotion attending upon the departure was over and she was left alone—then her thoughts returned to the forbidden subject and remained there.

Foster Townsend had been absent-minded and distrait ever since his return from his call at the Griffin studio the previous afternoon. It was obvious that he did not care to talk of his interview with Bob. And to-day, when she again questioned him, he had been just as non-committal. That there was something mysterious about this accident to Seymour Covell she had been almost sure from the beginning. Bob's behavior that fateful night was strange. He, too, had avoided her questions; had run away from them. She had guessed and surmised and dreaded—and now, this very forenoon, when she stopped in at the millinery shop to chat with her Aunt Reliance, whom she had not seen for a week, this new and frightening rumor had been whispered in her ear.

It was Abbie Makepeace who had whispered it. Reliance Clark was out, delivering a hat at the home of a customer. Millard was not in evidence. Abbie had a clear ten minutes; she knew it, and she could say a great deal in that time. Whatever fabric of fact there might have been in the strange story was well covered with fictional embroidery when it reached Miss Makepeace, and she handed it on without the loss of a thread.

"So there 'tis," she said, in conclusion. "For the land sakes don't say *I* said there was any truth in it. Who the person was that saw 'em there—if anybody did see 'em—I'm sure I don't know and neither does anybody except that one—if there was such a one, as I said before. And just as likely there wasn't. It's all over town anyhow. Your Aunt Reliance heard it, of course, and she declares up and down she doesn't believe a word of it. She gets real mad if I so much as mention it in this shop. Thought she'd take my head off this very mornin', I did. 'Well,' says I, 'you needn't lay me out. I wasn't on the lower road at two o'clock in the mornin'. I was in my bed and asleep, where I belonged. And, even if it is all a lie, I don't see why you need fly up in the air so. I declare, I—' "

And so on. The mill was still going when Esther hurried from the shop. She went home, thinking of what she had just heard. She was thinking of it now, as she sat there in the library. And the longer she thought the more certain she became that she must know the truth. She must.

She rose at last with her mind made up. She ran to her room, put on her hat, came down and, after telling Nabby Gifford that she was going for a walk, left the house. She took the path across the fields and another "short cut" which brought her to the beach a little way beyond the Tobias Eldridge property. It was after four o'clock, the day was cloudy and a light fog was drifting in from sea. She was thankful for the semidarkness and the fog, for they might shield her from observation, from recognition at least. But had the afternoon been brilliant with sunshine she would not have hesitated. She was on her way to see Bob Griffin. She did not know, of course, that he was there, in his studio; it was just as likely that he was not. But if he were not there, even if he were at his grandfather's home in Denboro, she would seek him out. She must see him. She must know.

She rapped on the weather-beaten door of the shanty. A moment later and Bob himself opened that door.

CHAPTER XVIII

BOB GRIFFIN answered that knock reluctantly. He had half a mind not to answer it at all. He had stopped in at the Eldridge home on his way down from the station—he had come from Denboro by train that afternoon—with the intention of telling his landlord that he intended vacating the shanty immediately, by the following noon at the latest. The announcement would not have come as a great surprise to Tobias; his tenant had warned him that, in all probability, he should not occupy the building longer than another week. Neither of the Eldridges was at home, however, so Griffin had left a note announcing his prompt departure, and was now packing together his easels, brushes, canvas and other paraphernalia. He intended driving over for them the next day.

Hearing the knock he took it for granted that the caller was Tobias. If it was he who knocked he would get rid of him quickly. If it were any one else—well, he would not let him in. He would not answer questions and he would not talk. He had talked far too much already.

In his shirt-sleeves, a hammer in his hand, he threw open the door. Then he stood there in silence, gazing at the girl before him.

She spoke first. "Bob," she asked, quickly, "may I come in? Please let me. I don't want any one to see me here; if I can help it."

He did not answer; but, still without taking his eyes from her face, he stepped aside. She brushed past him and entered the room. It was the first time she had crossed its threshold since the day when she brought her uncle there to see her portrait.

"Please shut the door," she said. He did so. Then he

would have spoken, but she did not give him the opportunity.

"Don't ask me why I am here," she begged. "I just came because—because I felt that I had to. Don't ask me anything. I will ask and—and you must answer. Bob, will you please tell me all about this thing? Tell me the truth—all of it."

He had had no time in which to collect his thoughts. He made no attempt to answer. His hand struck the back of a chair and he moved it toward her.

"Won't you sit down?" he faltered.

She pushed the chair impatiently away. "Oh, don't!" she cried. "Don't waste time. Of course I won't sit down. Did you think I had come to make a formal call? Bob! Bob, please answer my questions! Tell me everything, just as it was, where and how you found him that night. And if— Oh, everything!"

He understood now. She, too, had heard the rumor, the story to which Foster Townsend had referred. In all probability every one had heard it by this time. But what did she believe concerning him—and his part in the affair? That was what he must know.

"I see," he said, slowly. "Of course—yes. . . . Well, what do you want me to tell?"

"Bob! Why must I say it again? I want you to tell me just what happened that night after you left the hall. They are saying—I have heard— Oh, I *know* it isn't true! I want you to tell me it isn't."

"I can't tell that until I know what you have heard."

"I have heard—I heard it this morning—that you and Seymour were seen together down here somewhere on the lower road, hours after the hall was closed and locked. You were seen here together—some one saw you, I don't know who. That is the story. Bob—"

"Wait a minute. It isn't the whole story, is it?"

"No, it is not. Bob, they say—they say you and he were—disagreeing—quarreling—"

"Fighting, perhaps?"

"Bob! Why— Do you think it is a *joke?* Don't you realize—"

"Hush, Esther! Certainly I realize. I realize quite as plainly as you can what else they will be saying soon—may be saying now, for all I know. What do you expect me to do about it?"

"Do! I want you to deny it all, of course. Speak out plainly and say it is all a lie."

"Suppose it isn't all a lie? As a matter of fact, most of it, so far, is true. Covell and I were together down on this road at two o'clock that morning. We did meet and we did quarrel. . . . There, there, Esther—"

She had turned pale. He stepped toward her, but she drew back.

"No, don't," she gasped.

He came no nearer. She was silent, for a moment, looking at him. Then, with a sharp catch of the breath, she leaned forward.

"Go on!" she said quickly. "Why don't you go on? Tell me the rest."

He shook his head. "I can't tell any more," he answered.

"But you must tell *me*. Don't you see you must?"

"No, I don't. I have not told any one else as much as that. I did not mean to tell anything."

"But you must tell. And they know—every one knows—or guesses. Some one saw you here. Oh, Bob!" with a desperate stamp of the foot, "can't you *see* what this may mean? They will begin to think—to say—"

He lifted his hand. "I understand," he said. "You mean they will soon be saying that it was not your uncle's horse that hurt Covell that night. They will say that I did it, knocked him down, tried to kill him, perhaps. Well, I expected that. . . . Tell me: Do you believe it?"

Her eyes flashed.

"You know I don't!" she cried, fiercely. "You know it.

It is because I don't that I came to find out the truth. Bob, won't you tell me? For your own sake? And for mine?"

He had been standing by the work bench, his face turned toward the window. Now he wheeled suddenly.

"Does it make so much difference to you?" he asked.

"Yes, it does."

"Esther—"

"Bob, *are* you going to tell me any more?"

He took a turn up and down the room. Then he stopped before her. "Esther," he said, "I will tell you what I can. This is what happened."

He told of his leaving the hall that night, of his walk along the beach, his stay at the studio, his noticing the Townsend span beside the road. There he hesitated.

"Yes," she urged. "And then—?"

"Well, then when Covell came along we got to talking. He said some things I didn't like and—and I told him I didn't like them. He said them again. I—well, in the midst of it he jumped back against the carriage. The horses started and reared. He fell under their feet. Before I could pull him out of the way the horse had kicked him. It was an accident and nothing more. That is the exact truth. I should like to have you believe it. Do you?"

She waved the question aside almost contemptuously.

"I never for a moment believed anything else," she said. "But you haven't told me at all what I really wanted to know. What was Seymour Covell doing down here on this road so late? Tell me that?"

Bob shook his head.

"That I can't tell you," he replied.

"But you know, don't you?"

"No, I don't know."

"Nonsense! I am sure you do. Or, at least, you are convinced in your own mind. Will you tell me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I—well, because it is not any of my business. You must wait and ask him. Perhaps, when he is well enough, he will tell you."

"I can't wait. If I'm to stop this dreadful talk I must know everything. He is unable to defend himself and—and his friends must do it for him."

So it was Covell she was so anxious to defend. He might have guessed it.

"No," he said, sharply. "I shall tell you nothing about him. He accused me of spying on him—told me that night that I was hanging about here to learn what he did and then carry tales to—to his friends. It was a lie, of course; but he shall never be able to say that I told those tales. No, indeed he shan't."

She was regarding him intently.

"Was that why you quarreled?" she asked.

"That—and other things. Yes."

"Bob," earnestly, "you and he weren't—weren't— Tell me: Was my name mentioned between you?

He shrugged. "*I* didn't mention it," he said. "Esther, don't ask me any more. I shall not tell you or any one else another word, now or ever. Don't worry. I am going away from here just as soon as I can get away. Then you will all be rid of one nuisance, at least."

"When are you going?"

"On the first ship that will take me. Early next week, I hope."

Her lips parted. Then they closed. Whatever she had been about to say remained unsaid. When she did speak it was to ask concerning a different matter.

"When Uncle Foster was here yesterday did you tell him what you have told me?" she asked.

"No. He had heard this story—that about the fellow, whoever he was, who saw me with Covell—"

"Wait! Don't you know who he was?"

"Haven't the least idea. What difference does it make? Somebody saw us; that was enough."

"And you didn't tell Uncle Foster?"

"I didn't tell him anything, except that I should not tell. . . . Oh, yes, I did, too! I told him something I had been longing to tell him. I told him I knew that he was happy because his plans and schemes to keep me away from you had worked out so well. And I also told him that I had been quite aware of those schemes from the beginning, that he hadn't fooled me in the least. Yes, and that if he and his tricks had been all I should never have given you up. I told him—and it did me good to tell him. The old— Oh well! why call him names now? He has won as usual."

"You told him—you told my uncle that he had schemed and planned? . . . Well?" proudly. "He denied it, of course?"

"Ha!" with a short laugh. "He did *not* deny it, not a word of it. He admitted that it was true. Seemed to be proud of it, if you must know. He told me in so many words that he had worked to get one of us in Europe and the other here; said he had never intended for a minute that you and I should, as he called it, get 'too friendly.' Oh, he made a clean breast of it—if you care to call such dirty business 'clean.' . . . Bah!"

He walked to the far end of the room. She remained standing by the chair, her fingers intertwined, looking straight before her.

"Bob," she said, after a moment.

"Well?"

"Tell me what else he said—please."

"He said a good deal. For instance, he informed me that the man you married would be some one he picked out for you, some one who was 'good enough for you.' But there! don't ask me to tell you any more. It ended by his offering to lend me money to help on with my art studies. Having driven me to Europe he was willing to pay me to stay there. . . . Oh, by George! That was the *last* straw!"

There was another pause. He heard her move and turning, saw that she was standing by the door, her hand upon the latch. The expression upon her face caused him to wish he had not spoken so frankly.

"I'm sorry, Esther," he said, impulsively. "Perhaps I shouldn't have told you this—about your uncle. It is the truth, but I guess it would have been better if I had kept my mouth shut. I wish I had."

If she heard and understood she gave no sign.

"Bob," she said, "may I ask you just one more question?"

"Oh, Esther, don't! I have told you all I can."

"It isn't about—that night. It is about us—about you. You are not going away until next week?"

"No. I would if I could, but I can't."

"Where will you be till then?"

"At home, in Denboro, I suppose."

"Bob, if—if I should want to see you before you go—if I should send for you, would you come? Could you meet me—somewhere—if I asked you to?"

"Of course. . . . But, Esther, what do you mean?"

"I don't know. Perhaps I don't mean anything. Good-by."

He ran to the door, but she was hurrying up the beach and, although he called after her, she did not turn.

Nabby Gifford was in the library when Esther reached home and Nabby had something to tell. Esther had no desire to hear it; she had hoped to reach her own room unobserved and to remain there, offering a headache or some other trite excuse for her non-appearance at the supper table. She could not talk with any one, nor listen while others talked. If her uncle were only there! She had much to say to him and—what—*what* could he say to her?

But Foster Townsend was in Boston and Nabby was in the library. And Nabby blocked her way as she tried to hurry through to the hall and stairs.

"Well," began Mrs. Gifford, "they got away all right. Varunas says the special car was waitin' for 'em and they

hi'sted poor Mr. Covell into it just as careful as if he was a crate of hens' eggs. Last Varunas see of him, the doctor was settin' one side of him and the nurse t'other. And he was layin' there comf'table, almost, as if he was to home."

Esther nodded absently and said she was glad to hear it. She put her hand to her forehead, preparatory to mentioning the "headache," but before she could mention it Nabby was rattling on.

"Yes sir-ee," said Nabby, "he looked just as if he was in his own bed, so Varunas says. He'll be all right, with a whole car to himself—just him and Doctor Bailey and the nurse and Cap'n Foster. . . . That is, that's all there'll be after they get by Denboro. Millard will get out there—at the Denboro depot—because Varunas heard your uncle tell him he must."

Esther had paid little heed to this chatter, but the name caught her attention.

"What?" she asked. And then, turning, to look at the housekeeper. "What was that you said then, Nabby?"

Nabby was dusting the library table. She kept on with the dusting.

"Eh?" she queried, with careful carelessness. "What did *I* say? When?"

"Just now. You said something about—about Uncle Millard, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, I did. Varunas says he heard Cap'n Foster tell him he could ride fur as Denboro, if he wanted to, but he'd have to get out there and come back on the night train. Course he'll have to wait quite a spell *for* that train, but—"

"Wait! Wait a minute. Uncle Millard! My Uncle Millard Clark, are you talking about?"

"Sartin. He's the only Millard in this town, fur's I know."

"Why was he going to Denboro?"

"Oh, 'cause your Uncle Foster told him to, so Varunas says. Whatever Millard wanted to talk with the cap'n about must have been pretty important, I guess. . . . But there! probably you know what it was a whole lot better than I do,

so I won't take up your time. Far as I'm concerned I can't imagine Mil Clark's talk bein' important enough to—"

"Nabby! Nabby, stop! What is all this? Tell me."

Nabby's air of surprise was a fairly successful counterfeit. "Oh!" she exclaimed, with lifted eyebrows. "Dear me! *Don't* you know anything about it? Humph! I cal'lated of course you did. 'Twan't none of *my* affairs, I realized *that,* but I thought you, bein' one of the family—one of both families, as you might say—would be let in on all the secrets there was goin'. Course the hired help—well, we ain't expected to—"

"Nabby! Do you want me to shake you? Now tell me the whole story, right away."

Which Nabby proceeded to do, it being precisely the purpose for which she had been waiting in the library. Millard Clark was on the station platform when the Townsend carriage drew up beside it. At the first opportunity he had seized Foster Townsend by the arm.

"Said he had somethin' important to say," went on Mrs. Gifford. "Said he'd been tryin' hard to get a word with Cap'n Foster for two, three days. Been here to the house a couple of times, he had, but—"

"Wait!" broke in Esther. "Was that true? Has he been here? I didn't know it."

Nabby sniffed contemptuously. "Neither did Cap'n Foster, fur's that goes," she declared. "Yes, yes, he's been here a couple of times—yesterday and the day afore 'twas—and he was in a turrible sweat to see your uncle. Well, your uncle wasn't in and neither was you, but if you had been I don't know's I'd bothered you on his account. I never imagined he was worth botherin' anybody about—much. I judged maybe he'd run short of money. I understand he's joined in with that good for nothin' crew that plays high-low-jack all night long at Elbert Peters' scallop shanty up the beach a mile or so beyond Tobe Eldridge's—and I guess likely he'd come to see if he couldn't borrow a couple of dollars. So I never took the trouble to tell you or the cap'n that he'd been here.

"Well, anyhow, there he was at the depot and he grabbed right aholt of your Uncle Foster soon's ever he got the chance. Varunas was standin' right alongside—course he wasn't tryin' to listen, you understand, but he just heard—and he heard the cap'n say he was busy and for Millard to let him alone. Mil, he wouldn't let him alone. 'It's mighty important,' says he. 'It's somethin' you'd ought to know, Cap'n Foster. Somethin' you'll thank me for tellin' you when you do know it.' Varunas says the cap'n turned 'round then and looked at him, kind of funny and more interested, as Varunas thought. 'What's it about?' says he. Now Varunas, he couldn't hear what Millard said next on account of Millard's standin' up on tiptoes and whisperin' it in your uncle's ear. Varunas says if he'd realized Mil was goin' to start in whisperin' he'd have come over nigher. But he didn't."

"Well, well! What then?"

"Well, then, accordin' to Varunas's story, your Uncle Foster stood there, pullin' his whiskers and lookin' at Millard queerer than ever. Finally, he seemed to make up his mind. 'Get in that car,' he says. 'You can ride with me far as Denboro,' says he, 'and tell me on the way.' Millard said somethin' about having no change along with him to pay fare, and how he didn't know's he'd ought to leave Reliance alone at mail time. Cap'n Foster barked at him, the way he does at folks he don't like—yes, and them he does like, sometimes. The way he's barked at me when I haven't done a thing except what was my business to do, is enough—but there! *I* understand him. Lord knows I'd ought to! And—"

"Is there any more?"

"Why, not much. Cap'n Foster barked out that he'd attend to the fare and if Millard took the night train back from Denboro he'd get home same time the mail did. So they got into the cars together and—and that's all. . . . But, Esther, don't *you* know what your Uncle Millard wanted to see your Uncle Foster about? Varunas and me, we've been tryin' to guess and guess, but— Mercy me! You ain't

goin' away now, are you? Why, you ain't said a word, scurcely."

Esther might have made the justifiable retort that she had been given no opportunity to say a word. She did not make it, however. She spoke of her headache and that she would not be down for supper. She went up to her room and remained there.

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN, the next morning, pale and heavy-eyed, she was making a pretense of breakfasting, Nabby came in from the kitchen with an announcement.

"Esther," she said, "your Aunt Reliance Clark is here at the side door. She wants to see you, she says. I told her you was eatin' your breakfast, but she said never mind, she'd wait till you got done. Pretty early in the mornin' to come callin', seems to me."

Esther rose from the table.

"Aunt Reliance!" she exclaimed. "Why, that is odd. Ask her to come into the library, please, Nabby."

Nabby lingered. "Say," she whispered, "you don't cal'late she's come to talk about what Millard went to Denboro along with Cap'n Foster for, do you? Well, if that is it, I hope she'll tell the rest of us. My heavens to Betsy!" with a sudden burst of candor; "I ain't had anything plague me so for I don't know when. And neither has Varunas. . . . Yes, yes! I'll fetch her right in."

Esther was in the library awaiting her aunt, when the latter appeared. Reliance's greeting was cheerful and, so long as Mrs. Gifford remained in the room, her manner was composed. But after Nabby, having lingered as long as she dared, departed, that manner changed.

"Esther," she said, hurriedly, "I've come here to have a talk and it's likely to be a long talk. Can't we go somewhere where we can be sure nobody will hear us?"

Esther nodded. "Come right up to my room," she said. "Nobody will disturb us there."

Upstairs, in the pink room, she turned to her visitor.

"Auntie," she said, "it's odd that you should have come here

to see me this morning. I was just on the point of going down to see you."

Reliance looked at her quickly and keenly.

"You were?" she asked. "Why?"

"Because—well, because I felt that I must see you. I have heard— Oh, I learned some things yesterday afternoon that—that— Aunt Reliance, I doubt if I slept an hour all night. I was coming to you for advice—and help. Oh, I am so glad you are here."

She was on the verge of tears. Reliance put her arm about her shoulder.

"I don't know what you've heard, dearie," she said. "But if it is a patch on what *I* have heard—and found out—since ten o'clock last night, then I don't wonder you haven't slept. . . . Your Uncle Foster is away, of course?"

"Yes. He is coming back from Boston on the eleven o'clock train. I wish he was here," she added, with a sudden change of tone. "I want to see him even more than I do you."

Reliance bent forward to look into her face.

"Esther," she asked, "have you and your uncle had a fallin' out?"

"No . . . not yet."

"Not yet? . . . Esther, what does that mean?"

"It means— Oh, never mind what it means! Perhaps I will tell you by and by. I shall—because I had made up my mind to. But you came here to tell me something. What is it?"

Her aunt's answer was prefaced by a troubled shake of the head.

"I came here to have a talk with you," she said. "Yes, and to tell you something—a lot of things. But if already you have heard something which makes you feel bitter towards your Uncle Foster, I—well, I don't know. I almost wish I had waited until he was here and told you both together."

"Aunt Reliance, whatever you have to tell me won't make any difference in my feeling toward him. If what I have heard is true—and I am afraid—yes, I am sure it is—then it is a

matter between him and me. And one other. Don't ask me about it now. Tell me what you came to tell. You have found out something about what happened that night, after the 'Pinafore' performance, between Seymour Covell and—and Bob. Of course you have. Well, so have I."

Reliance was startled. "*You* have found out—!" she cried. "But how could you?"

"Bob told me. I went to see him at his studio yesterday afternoon."

"You went there! Oh, dear me! That was a risky thing to do, Esther. There will be more talk."

"I don't think any one saw me; but never mind if they did. I had to go."

"And did he tell you—everything?"

"No; but he told me a good deal. He admitted that he met Seymour on the lower road that morning, that they had high words, and how the accident happened. He would not tell me why Seymour was there, with uncle's horses, at such a time. Nor why they quarreled. Oh, Aunt Reliance, if you do know more than that, please tell me. Can't you see I must know?"

Reliance still hesitated.

"Before I do, dearie," she said gently, "will you answer another question? Do you—do you really care for this Mr. Covell?"

Esther stepped back. "Care for him?" she repeated. "Care *for him?* . . . No," emphatically, "I do not."

Reliance seemed to find the answer satisfactory. She nodded.

"I see," she said slowly. "You poor child! Yes, yes, I see. You must have had a dreadful time the last few days. I will tell you. I learned a lot last night before I went to bed. This morning I made it my business to learn the rest. Esther, where do you suppose I've been—just now, before I came here?"

"Why—I don't know."

"I guess you don't. And very few others, I hope. I have

been away down to Henry Campton's house on the lower road. I went there to see that girl of his—that Carrie."

Esther stared in utter amazement. "You went to see Carrie Campton?" she repeated. "Why?"

"Because I judged she could fit in the pieces of the puzzle I was trying to work out. And that is what she did before she and I finished. Wait a minute, Esther. Yes, she fitted in the last pieces, but the first ones came from somebody else. You have heard the story that has been going around—that about some man or other who saw Covell and Griffin that night? But of course you have. Abbie Makepeace told me she was kind enough to repeat it to you. Well, I told *her* one or two things when I learned what she had done. She scarcely speaks to me now, but that is a great deal harder trial for her than it is for me. Esther, I know now who that man was. He—oh dear! I hate to tell you his name. I am ashamed to."

Esther smiled, faintly. "Perhaps you don't need to," she said. "It was Uncle Millard, wasn't it?"

And now it was Miss Clark who was amazed.

"My soul!" she gasped. "How did you know that?"

"Oh, I don't know. I guessed it. It came to me last night, while I was lying awake, thinking. I knew—Nabby told me—that he had been here to see Uncle Foster several times on what he called important business. And Varunas heard a little of what he said to uncle on the station platform yesterday. And this 'business' of his was so important that Uncle Foster took him as far as Denboro on the train in order to hear it. I wondered—and wondered—and then—I guessed."

"My—my—my! Well," with a sigh, "you guessed right. I don't think *I* should have guessed. For one thing I wouldn't have believed the scamp could keep a secret from me so long—Humph! I rather think he is sorry he kept this one. And he'll be sorrier still before I get through with him. Yes, he was the man. . . . And now, dearie, I want you to sit down in that chair, and just listen, and be a brave girl, while I tell you the whole story, every last scrap of it."

The eleven o'clock train was an hour late that day and Foster Townsend's temper was not improved by the delay. He had had a wearisome, trying session since leaving home the previous afternoon, the culmination of a week of trial and worry. Millard Clark's "important business" had come as a new and most disturbing shock to his mind. The greater part of the mystery concerning the accident to Seymour Covell was a mystery no longer, but there were some points still unexplained. He knew now how Covell had been hurt and where, but he did not know—nor could Clark tell him—why his guest had driven the Townsend span to that spot at that hour. That troubled him. Any reason which his imagination could furnish was not reassuring. Then, too, his meeting with Covell, Senior, in Boston was not altogether a pleasant memory. The Chicago man had not breathed a word of reproach or blame, but Townsend felt himself to blame nevertheless. The young fellow had been put in his charge; he had, in a way, assumed responsibility for his safety and his actions. The accident was bad enough, but if behind it was something disreputable—why, that was worse.

And, beside this was the question of the obligation owing Bob Griffin. The hints and rumors concerning Bob's part in the happenings of that night were whispered everywhere. He, himself, had heard no direct accusations, but they were certain to be made. He could prevent them by telling the truth, and compelling Millard to tell it, but that would not stifle curiosity, merely headed in other directions. The two young men were fighting—but why? And, more than all, why was Covell there? Scandal, scandal, and more scandal! And his niece's name sure to be coupled with it.

How much should he tell Esther? Or should he tell anything—yet? These were his cheif perplexities at the moment. He had believed, his own desire prompting the belief, that Esther had broken with Griffin for good and all and that if she had ever cared for him she did so no longer. But, as she had heard the rumors—he knew, from her own lips, that she had—

if he should tell her as much of the truth as he now knew, Elisha Cook's grandson would immediately become, in her eyes, a martyr. Perhaps a dangerously fascinating martyr, unjustly accused and sacrificing himself to shield some one else. And, convinced of that, she might— Oh, who could tell what a romantic girl of her age might do!

He reached a determination and the Harniss station at the same time. He would tell her nothing for a while. Griffin was leaving for Europe almost immediately. After he had gone—was out of the way and beyond recall—then he could tell, and he would.

Varunas and the span were waiting at the platform and Varunas had a telegram in his hand. It, the telegram, was not a sedative for Foster Townsend's nerves or temper. It was from his lawyers requesting his presence at a very important meeting in their Ostable office that afternoon. He must attend; his presence was necessary.

He jammed the telegram into his pocket and swore aloud. Varunas heard him and turned on the driver's seat.

"Eh?" he queried. "Did you speak, Cap'n Foster?"

"No."

"Didn't ye? Funny! I thought I heard you say my name."

"Humph! You flatter yourself. . . . You've got to drive me to Ostable to-day, it seems. Be ready to start right after dinner. Esther's at home, I suppose; eh?"

"Why, no, she ain't. She's gone down to Reliance Clark's. Reliance, she was up to our house most of the forenoon and then Esther went back along with her. Said she didn't know whether she'd be home to dinner or not."

Somehow this announcement ruffled the Townsend feelings still more. For his niece to treat thus carelessly so important an event as his return was irritating as well as most unusual.

"That's queer," he growled. "She knew I would be at home for dinner, didn't she? Yes, of course she did."

"Um-hum. She knew. Nabby reminded her of it just as she and Reliance were goin' out the door, but she didn't make

no answer. Looked awful sober and—and kind of strange, so Nabby thought."

Townsend ate a lonely dinner and enjoyed it little. Just as he was finishing his pie Esther came in at the front door and went up the stairs to her room. He called to her, but if she heard she did not heed. He called again. Then he put down his fork, rose from the table, and followed her.

She was in her room; the door was open, and he entered without knocking.

"Well," he demanded, in a tone half jocular and half serious. "What's all this? Clear out just when you know I'm due at home, let me eat my dinner all by myself, and then, when you do come in, march upstairs without so much as a hail. What's the matter? Aren't sick, are you?"

She was standing by the mirror, removing her hat. She spoke over her shoulder.

"No, Uncle Foster," she said. "I'm not sick."

"Humph! I am glad of that much, anyhow. Well, I haven't seen you for a whole day. How about a kiss? That's been the usual custom between you and me, unless my memory's gone adrift."

She turned then and came towards him. He kissed her. Then he noticed how pale she was.

"Why, good Lord!" he exclaimed. "You're white as a sheet."

He was holding her face between his hands and the light from the window fell upon it. Her eyes were red.

"Good Lord!" he cried, in alarm. "You look sick, whether you are or not."

"Do I? Yes, perhaps I do."

"What is it? What's the matter?"

She stepped back, although he tried to detain her.

"Uncle Foster," she said, "I am glad you came up here. I hoped you would. Will you please close the door?"

"Eh? Shut the door? Why? . . . Humph! Well, all

right, it's shut. Now then— Say, for heaven's sake, what is up, Esther? What's all this privacy?"

"And will you please sit down and listen to what I have to say?"

He moved toward a chair. Then he hesitated.

"'Twon't take you long, will it?" he asked, glancing at his watch. "Those blasted lawyers are expecting me over at Ostable this afternoon. Goodness knows I don't want to go, but I guess I've got to."

She did not answer. He sat down. She did not sit, but stood facing him. He was smiling, but she was not and, as he met her look his own smile faded. It was a most peculiar look. He began to feel uneasy.

She did not keep him waiting. "Uncle Foster," she said, "I want you to tell me now just how much you know about the accident to Mr. Covell. All that you know."

His brows drew together. The demand was not entirely unforeseen, of course. This was the only subject of great importance in her mind and his just now and he had expected her to refer to it. But answering required consideration. How much did she, herself, know? That, he thought, was the all-important question.

He crossed his legs. "Well," he said, slowly, "that will be kind of hard to tell, won't it, Esther? When you say 'know' I judge you mean know and not guess! I know some things, and I have heard a lot more."

"But what do you know?"

"We-ll," still temporizing, "I know—I know— But there! I don't see any use of going over all this again now. I ought to be on the way to Ostable this minute. I'll be back late to-night. Anyhow I'll be on hand all day to-morrow. Why can't it wait till then, when we have plenty of time?"

He would have risen, but the tone of her next speech caused him to remain seated.

"I don't wish it to wait," she said. "I want to hear it now."

"But I can't stop, Esther. Don't you see? I am in a hurry. This lawyer thing is important."

Her eyes flashed and her tone changed. "Important!" she repeated, scornfully. "Does that mean it is more important than clearing the name of—of some one who is gossiped about and lied about and accused of—of—oh, of attempted murder, very likely? Is your miserable lawsuit more important than that? It isn't to me, I can tell you."

"Why, Esther—"

"Uncle Foster, you were going away this afternoon without telling me anything. I know you were. All through this dreadful affair you have kept secrets from me, and hidden the truth from me. You didn't intend telling me one word of what Uncle Millard— Oh, I won't call him that! I hate him!—of what he told you in the train yesterday. You were going to hide that from me, too."

Foster Townsend leaned forward. His interview with Millard Clark had taken place only the previous afternoon. Clark had given his oath that he had told no one the details of what he had seen and heard that night on the lower road. He had, under threats of bodily harm if he ever told any one else, repeated that oath. And now, within a few hours. . . . Townsend leaned slowly back in the chair.

"Humph!" he growled. "Reliance told you, of course. The confounded lying sneak told her and she ran up hot foot to tattle to you. I'll break that fellow's neck next time I see him. I'd like to break hers," he added, under his breath.

Esther ignored the threatened danger to the Clark necks. She was no longer pale; the color had returned to her cheeks.

"Yes," she said, defiantly. "Yes, Aunt Reliance did tell me. Of course she did. But *you* weren't going to tell me. You were going to hide it from me, as you have hidden all the rest."

"How could I tell you?" impatiently. "You weren't around when I got here. You weren't around at dinner time. And when you did come home you came straight up here without

so much as a word to me. What chance have I had to tell you anything? Come, come, girl! be fair!"

The word was an unfortunate choice. "Oh, don't ask *me* to be fair!" she retorted, fiercely. "How fair have you been to me? You *know* you weren't going to tell me. If you had intended to tell you would have done it the moment you entered this room. I gave you the opportunity to tell. I even asked you to. And all you did was intimate that you had 'heard' some things. You tried to put me off."

This, being the exact truth, was hard to deny. Her uncle did not deny it. Instead he returned to the subject of Mr. Clark.

"The blackguard!" he snarled. "Why, Esther, do you know why he was so set on telling me his yarn? Me and nobody else? Why, because he expected to get money for it. Thought I'd pay him for keeping his mouth shut. Well, he hasn't kept it shut and when he comes crawling around to get his price I'll—I'll— Oh, by the Almighty, let him come! I'll be glad to see him."

She paid no heed. Plainly she was not at all interested in what might happen to Millard Clark.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked.

"Do? About what?"

"What are you going to do, now that you know Bob Griffin was not in the least responsible for Seymour Covell's hurt? Are you going to tell every one that? You must."

He pulled at his beard. "Why—why, yes, of course I am," he admitted, frowning. "That is, I shall pretty soon. Now, now—hold on! There are a good many loose ends to this business. There is a lot to be considered before we do anything rash. Of course, if any one was to say out and out that Griffin was responsible I should put a stop to it. But nobody can say that because it isn't true. They talk and guess and so on, but they are bound to do that. It doesn't harm Griffin any, really. He is going off—to Paris—in two or three days."

"And you would let him go—and not tell?"

"Hold on, hold on! I said I should tell, didn't I? But we don't know anything yet. We must think about—well, about poor Seymour for one. There he is, up in that hospital, senseless, can't say a word—"

"Oh, stop!" scornfully. "Is *that* the reason why you don't want to tell? You are so afraid *his* feelings or reputation may be hurt. And yet you will let Bob leave home under a cloud, while the people here lie about him as much as they like. Oh, shame on you!"

He twisted in the chair.

"Come, come, that'll do!" he said, brusquely. "You are almighty touchy about this Griffin, I must say. I'm not defending any one in particular. I say there are things we don't know, that's all. We don't know what brought Seymour down to the lower road that night. And— Here! Why do you look like that? Do *you* know?"

"Yes, I do. He went there to see Carrie Campton. He was in her parlor with her for more than an hour. *She* brought him there; or he brought her there. At any rate there he was."

Foster Townsend sprang to his feet. "Carrie Campton!" he repeated. "Carrie Campton— Do you mean to say he went there to see *her?* I don't believe it. What for?"

"Why should I know? Probably because he liked her. . . . Now don't ask me more about that. It is true. She told Aunt Reliance all about it this very morning. I suppose she hasn't told before because—well, because. Now will you tell every one the truth, all of it?"

He did not answer. He stood there, rubbing his beard, and considering what he had just heard. He had no doubt it was true. And it explained everything. But it humiliated him, made him furiously angry, not only at Covell, but at every one concerned in this disgraceful snarl entangling his—the great Foster Townsend's—name and household. He strode to the door.

"Well, I'll be darned!" he muttered, between his teeth.

His niece reached the door before him and stood with her back against it.

"Wait! Wait, Uncle Foster!" she ordered. "You can't go yet. I have more to say to you."

"I don't want to hear it. I have heard too much already. And I am half an hour late as it is."

"I am sorry for that, but you must hear the rest. Uncle Foster, why did you refuse to tell me what Bob said to you and what you said to him the other day at his studio?"

"Eh? What are you talking about? I didn't refuse."

"Yes, you did. Or, at any rate, you told me nothing that amounted to anything. You did not tell me that he charged you with planning my trip to Europe merely to get me away from him—and canceling it when you found he was going. You didn't tell me that, nor that you admitted it was true. Yes," bitterly, "and boasted of your cleverness, gloried in your trickery. You didn't mention that."

She had caught him again. He had no defense ready. The suddenness of the accusation left him mute and staring.

"How—how on earth did you know about that?" he gasped.

"Bob, himself, told me. I went down there to see him yesterday afternoon."

His face, already flushed, grew redder still as this paralyzing statement forced itself upon his comprehension. He drew back slowly.

"What!" he roared. "You went down to that shanty to see that fellow?"

"Yes."

"Good God! Why—why, what do you mean by it? Didn't I tell you never to go near that place again?"

"Yes."

"Didn't you promise me you wouldn't?"

"Yes."

"Then—then—what—"

"I broke my promise. I had to. When I heard the things they were saying about him I—I had to find out. So I went,

that is all. I didn't learn all I hoped to learn. He wouldn't tell me why Seymour was there on that road that night, although I think he knew, or could guess. I suppose—it would be like him—he would not tell tales concerning another fellow. But he did tell me of his talk with you and—and . . ." Her voice broke. "Oh, Uncle," she finished, desperately, "how could you!"

The misery in her tone, the tears in her eyes, her sudden plea for understanding, did not move him. At another time they would have done so, but not then. He offered no excuses. He did not attempt denial. The fact that she had gone, alone and in spite of his orders and her promise, to see Griffin was sufficient. All his delusions, all his conceit in the triumph of his scheming, all his silly, easy confidence that her interest in Elisha Cook's grandson was a thing of the dead past—all these were blown away like a summer fog by that one disclosure. She had paid no attention to his wishes, his commands —she had defied him—him, Foster Townsend. If she had been a man he would have knocked her down.

"What!—" he shouted. "What's that? How could I? How could *you,* you better say! Going there to see the scamp the whole town is talking about! Mixing your name up with his! Letting them talk about *you* now! Why—why—"

She lifted a hand. "Don't!" she begged. "Please don't!"

"Don't! Don't what? Did you expect I was going to hear a thing like that from you and—and grin? Did you expect I was going to purr and say I liked it! You—*you,* by the Lord! the girl I swore by and depended on—a Townsend, too—waiting until I was out of the way and then crawling on your hands and knees after that—oh, what shall I call him? The young—"

Again she stopped him. "Don't! Don't!" she cried once more. "You mustn't say those things. . . . Uncle Foster, I am going to marry him."

Again he was stricken speechless. He stared open-mouthed. Then he put his hand to his forehead.

"She's gone crazy," he muttered. "I believe she has; I swear I do! Esther, for heaven's sake, let's—"

"No, no, I mean it, Uncle Foster. I have made up my mind. I am going to marry Bob. That is," with a wan smile, "if he will have me now, after all this."

For a long instant they looked each other in the eyes. Then he drew a deep breath.

"If I thought you meant that," he said, slowly. "If I thought for one minute you really meant it—"

He paused. Her anger seemed to have gone and her color with it, but there was no hesitation or lack of firmness in her reply.

"I do," she said. "Oh, I know you will never forgive me. Perhaps I am ungrateful and wicked—I can't tell. I do love you, Uncle Foster, indeed I do! In spite of the mean, deceitful tricks you have played to keep Bob and me apart and to gain your own way. I love you in spite of them, I can't help it. But I love him more. I know now that he is more to me than all the rest of the world. And, if he will have me, I shall marry him."

There was another interval. Then he put a hand on her arm and led her across the room to the easy-chair by the window.

"You sit down there, Esther," he said, quietly. "You just sit there and rest and calm down. You've had a lot on your mind lately and you got mad with me because you thought I was hiding things from you, and—well, your nerves have gone to pieces. You just stay there for a while, or lie down and take a nap or something. When I come back to-night, if it isn't too late, you and I will have a nice, sensible talk. If not, we will in the morning. I am going to forget all the nonsense you've just said and I want you to."

"It isn't nonsense."

"I know, I know. Well, it will seem like nonsense by and by, after you've thought it over. . . . There, there! Be a good girl. I'll send Nabby up with some hot tea or something.

Tea is good for nerves, so folks say. Now I'm off for the lawyers. See you later."

She called to him. He turned.

"Eh? Yes?" he queried.

She was sitting quietly in the chair, her hands in her lap, and the sunlight glistening upon her wet cheeks. She was looking at him steadily—and, it seemed to him, longingly. Yet all she said was:

"Good-by, Uncle Foster."

"Eh? Oh, yes! Well, good-by."

CHAPTER XX

AT four that afternoon Reliance Clark was alone in the millinery shop at the rear of the post office building, sewing this time not upon the material for a bonnet or hat, but a much-needed dress for herself, which she was making over from an old one. Business at the Clark-Makepeace shop was distressingly dull. The summer season was at an end. The cottages, most of them, were closed. Even the Wheelers, usually among the very last to leave, had departed for New Haven. Margery, so people said, was responsible for the curtailing of their stay. "The poor child," so her mother explained to Mrs. Colton, "is tired out. She worked *so* hard to make the 'Pinafore' performance a success. If it had not been for her persistence and patience—yes, and talent, if I do say so, my dear—I don't know how we should have come through. And then this distressing accident—if it *was* an accident—to Mr. Covell. It was the last straw. Such a shock to her nerves. She and poor Seymour were *great* friends. Of course Margery says little about it, even to me, but she has not been herself since it happened. Yes, we are closing the cottage. Where we shall spend the winter I am not yet just sure. I rather fancy California, but Margery seems more inclined toward the Riviera. Of course what Mr. Wheeler may decide is uncertain, but it will, without doubt, be one or the other."

Skeptics, remembering similar declarations of former years, smiled behind the lady's back. Captain Ben Snow said to his wife:

"Um-hum. Yes. Well, California's a good place and so, I shouldn't wonder, is this River-what-d'ye-call-it, but they are a long way off—and expensive. Adeline Wheeler may talk Cali-

fornia and Margery somewhere else, but when papa begins to say things he'll say New Haven, Connecticut, same as he always has before. As my grandfather used to tell, 'Talk is cheap, but it takes money to buy Medford rum.' You can address your Wheeler mail to New Haven, Mary, and I guess it won't fetch up in the dead letter office."

Whether this prophecy was or was not a true one remained, of course, to be seen, but at all events the Wheeler household had joined the general exodus from Harniss. The gatherings in the post office at mail times had shrunk almost to mid-winter size. Reliance found time to do her housekeeping in the manner which, according to her New England ideas, housekeeping should be done, and to attend to her own dressmaking. On this particular afternoon, Abbie Makepeace had gone home early to write her column for the *Item*.

Millard Fillmore Clark was on duty in the little room behind the racks of letter boxes. Mr. Clark had passed a most unhappy eighteen hours. The trouble began immediately after his return home the previous evening, following the impromptu excursion to and from Denboro. He had delayed that return until ten, hoping that Reliance might have gone to bed. She was up and awaiting him, however, and he was subjected to a questioning which developed into a cross-examination and continued as a tongue lashing lasting far into the morning. He slunk upstairs with a very definite idea of the position he occupied in his sister's estimation.

Rising, cowed and humble, he ate a lonely breakfast, washed the dishes and then, still in obedience to orders, reported at the millinery shop. Reliance was out, but she had left instructions with Miss Makepeace. He was to go into the little room at the rear of the letter boxes and stay there. "She said for me to tell you she was likely to be away most of the forenoon," said Abbie, "and that you was to 'tend the office till she came back, no matter what time it was. And—oh, yes!—she said to be sure and tell you to remember this wasn't healthy weather for you to go outdoors in. I don't know what she

meant by that. Are you sick, Millard? You don't look real lively this mornin', that's a fact."

Millard grumbled something to the effect that he didn't know but he was a little mite under the weather and shut off further conversation by closing the door between the post office and millinery department. He spent the forenoon waiting upon the few customers who came for their mail or to buy stamps, looking out of the window of his prison cell, reading every postal card available, and reflecting dismally upon his prospects for the immediate future. They were dismal enough. In the course of their midnight session Reliance had expressed pointed opinion concerning the pleasant little games of "seven-up" at the scallop shanty.

"I wondered what was keepin' you out half the night four nights in a week," she said. "I thought of a good many things that might be doin' it—of course I never paid any attention to what you *told* me; I knew better than that—but I never once thought of your bein' down in that shanty, gamblin' with that crew. You, a Clark! I declare! I am more ashamed of you than ever, which is sayin' somethin'."

"Now, now, hold on, Reliance! I wasn't gamblin'. That is— Why, confound it all, how could I gamble, if I wanted to? I don't have money enough in my pocket to buy tobacco hardly. Here I am, workin' for the United States government, takin' care of all the mail that comes into this town—a responsible position, by godfreys! And what do they pay me for all the work and responsibility? Eh? I ask you now! What do I get for it?"

"Oh, be still! In the first place the government doesn't hire you. *I* hire you, and I pay you about twice what I could get real help for. If I paid you what you were worth you would owe me money every Saturday night. But you are my half-brother—more shame to me—and so— Oh, well, never mind! We won't argue about that. You say you weren't gamblin'. You were playin' cards for money, weren't you?"

"Why—why, I don't know's you'd call it money. Some

of the fellows there seemed to think that heavin' cards back and forth across the table for nothin' was kind of dull work, so they figgered 'twould be better to have a little mite *on* the cards. Say a cent a point, or somethin' like that, you understand."

"Yes, yes!" sharply. "I understand well enough. A cent a point! And you without money enough in your pocket to buy tobacco! How much have you won since these interestin' games got goin'?"

Millard fidgeted. "We-el," he confessed, "I—well, you see, Reliance, I haven't really won much of anything, as you might say. I have had the darnedest streak of bad luck. All the boys say it's as bad a streak as they ever saw."

"Um. I see. Well, how much have you lost?"

"Eh? Lost? . . . We-ll, I figger I'm out about eleven dollars and eighty-one cents just now. Course the luck is bound to turn any minute. All the fellers say it is and they keep tellin' me to stick right along till it does."

"Yes," sarcastically, "I guess likely they do. I should think they would. The longer you stick the more they can stick you. You have lost about twelve dollars. Why, look here, Millard Clark; where did you get twelve dollars to pay gamblin' debts with?"

Mr. Clark tried to answer, but any adequate answer was beyond his imagining just then. Reliance did not wait long.

"I see," she said, scornfully. "I see. It is plain enough now. You didn't pay. You owe that crowd the twelve dollars and that was what sent you chasin' at Foster Townsend's heels. You happened to see Bob and the Covell man on the lower road that night—and if you had been in your bed at home here where you belonged, instead of gamblin' with the town riff-raff until two in the mornin', you wouldn't have seen them—you saw them and, knowin' how Cap'n Foster hates any of Elisha Cook's family you— Oh, my soul! You expected Foster would *pay* you for what you had to tell him.

You were goin' to get your twelve dollars out of him. . . . That's enough from you. Go to bed!"

"But, but, Reliance," desperately. "I—I— Oh, you're all wrong. I wasn't cal'atin' to ask Cap'n Foster to pay me. I—well, I thought maybe, considerin' that I'd been kind enough to tell him what he'd ought to know, and what I hadn't told another soul, I thought maybe he'd lend me a little somethin'. I was goin' to pay him back."

"Pay him back! Yes, I guess so! And to think that you are my half-brother and Esther's own uncle! Well, I have shirked my duty long enough. Now it is time I began to do it. I don't know who would hire you for a steady job at hard work, but perhaps there is some one. I might be able to coax Seth Francis to ship you aboard his schooner for a trip to the Banks. It would take a lot of coaxin', but I might; he hasn't lived in Harniss very long, so he doesn't know you quite as well as the rest of us. No, I won't hear another word. Go to bed!"

So the future, as Mr. Clark was viewing it through the little panes of the post office window, was far from alluring. He almost wished that he had not attempted winning Foster Townsend's favor by revealing the secret of the meeting on the lower road. Of course his sister had not been in earnest when she threatened him with a trip to the Banks as green hand on a fishing boat, but—well, she would never again trust him. His easy berth in the post office, with its ample leisure, its opportunities to show off and to air his importance before his fellow townsmen, his comfortable room in the cottage, his three well-cooked meals a day—all these were in danger. Reliance was thoroughly angry. He was in disgrace. The more he reflected the more uneasy he became and, although he resented his imprisonment behind the letter boxes, he resolved to serve out his term, no matter how long it might be, with an assumption of cheerful eagerness. He considered himself a persecuted martyr, but he would play the rôle of a sinner seeking forgiveness. It was a polite pretense which

had worked well on other occasions; it might work even in the present crisis.

About ten o'clock he saw, through the window, Reliance Clark enter the yard. Esther Townsend was with her and they went into the house together. It was after twelve when they came out. They separated at the gate, Esther walked away along the sidewalk and her aunt entered the millinery shop. Millard heard her speak with Miss Makepeace; then she opened the door of the little room.

"Your dinner is ready," she announced, curtly. "Go in and eat it this minute."

Mr. Clark was smilingly eager. "All right, Reliance," he agreed. "Yes, yes, just as you say, of course. You have had your dinner already, have you?"

"I have, all I want. I'm not hungry to-day."

"Ain't you? Well, now that's too bad. I am afraid you have been workin' too hard. Say, why don't you go and lay down a spell? Never mind about me. I can get along without eatin'. I'll stay here and attend to everything and you just—"

"Sshh! Go in and eat your dinner. And hurry up about it. I want you here when the mail comes. You understand that? All right. Then go."

Millard went. He was back before the arrival of the mail.

"That was as good a meal as ever I ate," he announced, with enthusiasm. "You certainly are a fine cook, Reliance. I washed up the dishes myself. Course you didn't tell me to, but I knew you was tired and I wanted to help you out."

"Yes? Humph! Well, I am tired. I heard enough from you last night to make me tired the rest of my life. Here is the mail wagon. Now let me see you work. *See* you—not hear you."

When the mail was distributed she again shut him in the little room and went out to join Miss Makepeace in the shop. At three she came in and superintended the preparation of the outgoing mail sacks. Then once more the door of his cell closed and he was left in solitary confinement.

Abbie went home at three-thirty. Reliance sewed briskly on her gown. She was thankful for the work, for it helped to keep her mind as well as her fingers occupied. She had had a distressful night, a hard, trying morning, and her recent interviews with Esther, at the mansion and in her own home, left her anxious and apprehensive. The girl's manner was most disturbing. Reliance had expected tears, recriminations—against Millard and Foster Townsend—hysterical outbursts, almost anything except the silent, stony, callousness with which her disclosures had been received. Esther, after her first expressions of astonishment at the mention of Carrie Campton's name, had listened intently, asked questions occasionally, but had neither wept nor exclaimed. She had accompanied her aunt to the cottage and remained there during dinner. She ate almost nothing and Reliance had eaten little more.

"But what are you goin' to do, Esther?" pleaded Reliance as they parted at the gate. "What are you goin' to say to your Uncle Foster?"

Esther looked away, across the road.

"I know what I shall say to him," she answered. "First I want to hear what he has to say to me."

"But, Esther—oh, my dear, you must be careful! You must! Remember, he thinks more of you than anybody else on earth. He has been very, very kind to you, in his way. I know he has been—well, selfish and stubborn and—and all that, but, after all, he was trying to do what he considers the best thing for you. And perhaps I am a little bit to blame, too. I am afraid I put the idea in his head of sendin' you away. I told you how that happened. Oh, Esther, do be careful! Don't do anything rash, will you?"

Esther did not turn. Her hand, however, groped for that of her aunt and pressed it tightly.

"Good-by, Auntie," she said. "I—I can't talk any more now, I shall see you again—and soon, I think."

"But promise me you won't do anything that you will be sorry for always, anything that will make us all miserable."

"I promise that, whatever I do, you shall know about it—and from me. I promise that."

She hurried away. And now, as Reliance sat there, trying to sew, her thoughts were not upon the stitches she was taking in the made-over gown; in spite of her resolution they strayed to the Townsend mansion, to the girl who had just gone there and the man she had gone to meet.

A cautious tap sounded on the shop door. Then the door opened and the head of Varunas Gifford appeared between it and the jamb.

"Hello!" hailed Mr. Gifford. "That you, Reliance? Can you come out here a minute? I've got somethin' for you."

Reliance put down her sewing and followed him out to the step. At the gate one of the Townsend horses and the Townsend dog-cart were standing. On the step, beside Varunas, was a large leather traveling bag. Reliance looked at the bag and then at the man who had brought it.

"Why!" she exclaimed. "What is this? This is Esther's bag, isn't it?"

Varunas nodded. "Um-hum," he replied. "That's whose 'tis. Seen it afore, I guess likely, ain't you?"

"Of course I have. But what have you brought it here for?"

" 'Cause she told me to. I was settin' out in the barn readin' the *Item*. You see, I ain't got much on hand to do this afternoon. Cap'n Foster, he give me orders, soon's ever I fetched him from the depot, to be ready to drive him over to Ostable when he got through dinner. Had a telegram, he did, callin' him over there to one of them lawyers' meetin's. So I was all ready and waitin'. But at the last minute he changed his mind and decided to drive himself."

"Yes, yes. What about Esther's bag?"

"I'm tellin' you fast as I can. I was settin' around, readin' the *Item,* when Esther she come and called me. 'Harness up the dog-cart or the buggy or somethin', Varunas,' says she, 'and fetch it 'round to the front door. I've got an errand I

want you to do.' So I done it. Then down the stairs come she, totin' this bag. 'You take that to my Aunt Reliance's,' she says. 'Give it to her and ask her to take care of it till I come.' That's what she said, and 'twas all she said, too."

"But—but why did she send it to me? What is in it?"

"Ask me somethin' easy. *I* don't know what's in it. Stone ballast, maybe; it's heavy enough. Say, Reliance, don't you know nothin' about it? . . . Humph! that's kind of funny, seems to me."

Reliance thoroughly agreed with him. Sending that traveling bag to her, to be taken care of until its owner came, was "funny" to say the least. And disturbing, also. She looked at the bag and tried to think, to imagine. And what she imagined frightened her.

Mr. Gifford had an inspiration. "Say," he suggested, eagerly; "why don't you open it? Probably there's somethin' there for you, a present, maybe. Here! I'll open it for you."

But Reliance caught his hand. "No, you won't," she ordered, sharply. "You let it alone. . . . Wait! Wait where you are just a minute."

She hurried back through the shop to the door of the little room where her brother was imprisoned. She listened at the crack. What she heard would, at any other time, have aroused her to indignant action. Now, however, she seemed relieved. Cautiously she opened the door and peeped in. Millard Fillmore Clark was seated in the corner, upon the official stool, his head against an empty mail bag, his mouth open, snoring placidly. Reliance shook her head, a shake which presaged trouble for the slumberer later on. Then she carefully closed the door and hastened out to the step.

Varunas was bending over the traveling bag. He looked up when she appeared.

"It's locked," he said, in righteous resentment. "I was goin' to open it for you and blessed if she ain't been and locked it. That's a healthy thing to do, I must say! A body'd think

she didn't trust me. I don't like her doin' that. I've a good mind to tell her so."

Reliance made no comment. "Take it in the house," she ordered. "Come right along. I'll show you where to put it."

Mr. Gifford, under her pilotage, bore the bag to the house, where it was placed on the floor of the dining-room closet. He would have lingered to ask more questions and offer surmises, but Reliance would neither linger nor listen. She got rid of him as soon as possible and, after she had seen him drive away from the gate, returned to her rocker in the millinery shop. She made no attempt to sew, however. She sat there thinking, thinking. What did Esther's sending that bag mean? What had happened? And what more was to happen?

The early fall twilight deepened. At five-thirty Reliance rose from the rocker, marched to the door of the mail room and threw it open.

"Get up!" she ordered. "Get up out of that this minute!"

Millard heard, started, opened his eyes and closed his mouth simultaneously.

"Eh?" he cried, the mouth reopening. "Eh? . . . Oh, is that you, Reliance? Well, I've been wonderin' where you was. I was sittin' here thinkin' about—oh, about different things, and—er—"

His sister interrupted.

"Get up off that stool," she said. "Come out here."

She led the way to the shop. Mr. Clark followed her.

"Been a kind of a stupid afternoon," he announced. "Not much doin' in the office there. How's your new dress gettin' on, Reliance?"

Reliance ignored the question. She opened the drawer of the table by the sewing-machine and took therefrom her worn pocketbook.

"Millard," she said, crisply, "I want you to listen to me and do what I tell you. I am too tired to bother with you any longer to-night. Get out of this buildin' and stay out."

"*Stay* out? What do you mean by that? What are you

puttin' me outdoors for, like a—like a cat? Aw, Reliance, what are you mad about? I suppose you think I was asleep in yonder. Well, I wasn't."

"Ssshh! I don't care whether you were asleep or not. You are as much use one way as the other. And I'm not mad. I'm just tired, same as I told you, and I can't be bothered with you. Here! here is some money. Go down to the Seaside House and get your supper there. Then, after that—well, I don't care what you do after that, so long as you don't come back here and worry me."

Millard stared. This was too good to be true—so good and so non-understandable that he did not dare accept it at its face value. There must be something behind it.

"Why—why, what on earth—?" he stammered. "Well—yes, I can get my supper at the Seaside. They turn out a pretty good meal there for thirty-five cents. But—but— Say, what about the mail when it comes in? Don't you want me to help you with that?"

"No. There won't be much of it and I had rather handle it myself, than have to handle you along with it. I don't need you and I don't want you."

"Well, I declare! . . . Humph! All right. I'm kind of tired, myself, and I'd just as soon have a little change and rest. I'll go, to please you, Reliance. I'll come back early."

"I don't want you to come back early. I don't care if you stay out all night. *Get* out! That is all I ask."

Mr. Clark got out, got out hastily and thankfully. What this remarkable change in his sister's attitude might mean he could not imagine, nor did he try. Supper at the Seaside House, where there were likely to be Boston "drummers" to listen to and gossip with, where the gang played pool every evening, where one might smoke a good five-cent cigar and not be nagged because of ashes on the floor—why, it was the promise of Paradise after Purgatory; and he had been in Purgatory ever since ten o'clock the previous night. And she did not

care when he came home. She had said that very thing. The game of high-low-Jack would be going on in the scallop shanty. He might—

He almost ran along the sidewalk in his haste to get beyond the sound of her voice.

At six Reliance locked the door of the shop and went into the house. She set about preparing supper. She was even less hungry now than she had been at dinner time, but she would, at least, drink a cup of tea—even two cups, although that was double her usual allowance. Tea was supposed to be a bracer, a strengthener for the nerves, and she was certain that her nerves would need strengthening before the night was over. She filled the kettle, set it on the kitchen stove, and then, returning to the dining room, she opened the door of the closet and stood looking down upon the traveling bag, bulky and black and menacing, on the floor beside the cooky jar. That bag, sent to her as it had been, could mean, she was certain, but one thing. That thing she must prevent if she could. But could she? Well, she could at least try. She sighed heavily and turned away.

She set the table. A knife and fork, a spoon, the loaf of bread, the butter, the milk pitcher—and all the time she listened, listened for the step upon the path leading to her door, the step she was expecting—and dreading.

And, at last, it came. She did not wait for a knock, but, hurrying through the sitting room to the outer door, threw it open. Esther was standing there, as she expected, but she was not alone. Bob Griffin was with her. The words with which Reliance had intended welcoming her niece were not spoken. She said nothing.

Esther did not wait for her to speak. She turned to her companion.

"Go in, Bob," she said, quickly. "Quick! before any one sees us."

She pushed by her aunt and entered the dining room. Griffin followed her. It was Esther, herself, who closed the door.

"Are you alone, Auntie?" she asked, eagerly. "Where is Uncle Millard?"

Reliance came out of her gaze with a start.

"Eh?" she queried. "Who? Oh, Millard? He—he's gone out for the evenin'; I told him to. And, if he knows what is good for him, he won't be back for a long time. . . . Well!" with a long breath. "Well, Esther, you have surprised me this time, certain sure."

Esther did not understand. "Why, you expected me, didn't you?" she cried. "You must have. I told Varunas to tell you I should come here to-night. . . . He brought my bag, didn't he? He told me he did."

"Yes. Oh, yes, he brought it. It is here. And I expected you. But I—well, I didn't expect any one else."

Her look at Griffin was significant. Bob noticed it and smiled. Of the three he alone seemed capable of smiling. Esther was pale and nervous and Reliance haggard and worn, after her night and day of shock and worry. Griffin was nervous also, but his face was flushed and his eyes bright. He was obviously excited and just as obviously neither downcast nor anxious.

"You mean you didn't expect me, Miss Clark," he suggested. "Well, I don't wonder at that. I surely did not expect to be here. I can scarcely believe it, even yet. Esther, shall I tell her? Or will you?"

Before Esther could reply, Reliance, now thoroughly awake to the realities, put in a word.

"Before you tell me anything," she said, "I think we might as well begin to behave like common-sense folks and not stand in the middle of the floor, you with your things on and me with my kitchen apron. Mr. Griffin, take off your things. Sit down, both of you."

But, although she pulled forward a rocker and an arm-chair, they did not sit. Esther turned a troubled face to her escort.

"I don't think we had better, do you, Bob?" she asked. "We

mustn't stay here long. We must get away just as soon as we can."

Bob nodded emphatic agreement. "You are quite right, Esther," he replied. "The sooner we get out of Harniss the better."

Reliance took a step toward them.

"What!" she exclaimed. "What was that? Get out of Harniss? What do you mean? Where are you goin'?" Then, her voice rising, she demanded sharply: "Come, come! What is all this? Esther, tell me this minute!"

Esther involuntarily put out a hand. "Oh, don't, Aunt Reliance!" she pleaded. "Don't speak like that. I— Oh, we came to you because you were the one person we could come to, the only one who would understand and—and help. If you knew how I have counted on your help and your sympathy and—oh, everything! Don't *you* begin by being angry with me. I—I don't think I could stand it now."

Her aunt crossed to her side and put an arm about her. "There, there, dear!" she said, heartily. "Don't you fret about that. If you can't count on me I don't know who you can count on. And I'm not cross, either. I am—well, I'm surprised—and a little scared, perhaps, but I am not cross. . . . There, there! . . . Now will you—one of you—please tell me what this means, this goin' away from Harniss?"

It was Bob who answered. His answer was prompt and to the point.

"I will tell you, Miss Clark," he said. "Esther and I are going to be married. We have decided that, caring for each other as we do, no one else shall be considered any longer. No one else has the right to be considered. She sent for me this afternoon, telegraphed me to come to my studio and meet her there. She told me that she had decided she could not live with her uncle any longer. She told me that she would marry me and go away with me, to Europe or anywhere else. That was enough, so far as I was concerned. We are leaving Harniss to-night—together. We came to tell you so and

to say good-by. That is the whole truth, isn't it, Esther?"

Esther lifted her head from her aunt's shoulder and stepped back to his side.

"Yes, it is," she said. "We are going to be married, Aunt Reliance. It is settled and no one can prevent it."

Reliance looked from one to the other. She put a hand to her forehead.

"My soul!" she exclaimed. "Oh, my soul! Wait—wait! Let me understand this. Esther Townsend, does this mean that you and—and he are goin' to run away—elope—whatever you call it—now, to-night?"

Esther nodded. "Yes," she said. "That is just what it means. Oh, Aunt Reliance, can't you see? I have made up my mind at last. I have thought of others and for others long enough. They haven't been thinking of me at all, but of their own selfish pride and prejudices. It is time—high time—I thought of my own happiness. I could never be happy without Bob, nor he without me. So we are going to be happy together, that is all."

Again Reliance looked at them both. There were no symptoms of faltering determination in either face. She looked long and steadily. Then she sighed.

"Oh, dear!" she murmured. "Oh, dear, dear! Well, I expected almost anything, after that bag was brought here this afternoon. Almost anything, but not just this. This is dreadful."

Griffin frowned. Esther straightened. Her eyes flashed.

"Dreadful!" she cried, indignantly. "Is *that* the way you feel about it, Aunt Reliance? You! Well, if you think my marrying Bob is dreadful then we made a mistake in coming here. I thought you would understand—and sympathize—and help. But if *you* are going to—"

Her aunt broke in. "Hush, hush," she said, quickly. "Don't be foolish, Esther. . . . I don't think your marryin' him is dreadful."

"You said you did."

"Said!" with an involuntary burst of impatience. "Well, perhaps I did, I don't know. Considerin' what I have been through since last night—and now with you two comin' here—this way—I—well, it is a wonder I haven't said—the Lord knows what. But, Esther Townsend, you must listen and you *must* let me say things. *I* don't think your marryin' Bob here is dreadful. If you care enough for him to give up everything and every one else for his sake, then it is exactly what you ought to do. It is the way you are doing it that is the dreadful part. Esther, dear, have you thought what this will mean to your Uncle Foster? He worships the ground you walk on. And he has been awfully good to you—you can't deny that. And, if everything folks say is true, old Mr. Cook idolizes his grandson. *They* will think your runnin' off, without so much as a word to them, is dreadful. Indeed and indeed they will! Oh, why be in such a hurry? Why not wait?"

She paused, out of breath, for she had delivered this long speech with all the force that was in her. It had no effect whatever, so far as she could judge by their expressions. And Bob's immediate reply proved that it had not.

"I know, Miss Clark," he said. "We both know how they will feel toward us and we have considered it very carefully. But the situation isn't changed at all. Esther and I mean to marry. You may not believe it—grandfather and Captain Townsend certainly won't believe it—but neither of us would have hurt their feelings or acted contrary to their wishes if we could have helped it. I am very fond of my grandfather, he has been mighty good to me, and Esther loves her uncle. He has not treated her fairly or honestly, she feels, but she loves him and always will. That is true, isn't it, Esther?"

"Yes, Bob, absolutely true."

"Yes, it is. But the fact remains that neither Captain Townsend nor my grandfather would ever consent to our marriage. They hate each other— you know it; everybody knows it. If we waited a year they would not consent. If we waited ten years they would not. So why should we wait? I have

money enough of my own to support us for a while and I hope to earn more. It is Esther here who is making the real sacrifice, of course, but she says she is willing to make it. Waiting won't help anybody. It will only stretch out the quarreling and misery. So, as we see it, it is simply plain common-sense, our marrying now. And we shall marry now, just as soon as we can. You can't stop us—no one can."

Reliance was silent. She would have liked to say much, to continue her protest—but how could she? The essential fact in this statement was beyond contradiction. Neither Townsend nor Cook would ever consent to such a marriage—she knew it. What Bob Griffin had just said was common sense and nothing else. And yet, conscious of the responsibility forced upon her, she did not entirely surrender. She made one more plea.

"Oh, Esther," she begged, "are you *sure* you care enough to—to go through with this? Not just now, but later, all your life? No matter if it means doin' without all the fine things you have been used to, bein' poor perhaps—and—"

"Hush! Yes, Auntie, I am sure."

Her aunt wrung her hands. "Well," she groaned, "I give up. I have said my say, I guess. I have done what I could. The dear Lord knows I hope we will none of us be too sorry in the years to come."

She walked across the room, stood there a moment and then turned. Her manner now was brisk and businesslike.

"There!" she said. "The milk is spilled. No use tryin' to pick it up or talk about it. What are your plans? Where is the weddin' to be?"

Esther looked at Bob and it was Bob who answered.

"We haven't decided that exactly," he said. "All this decision of ours is so sudden that we haven't had time to plan much of anything. My horse and buggy are out at the gate. I am going to take Esther over to my cousin's house in South Denboro to-night. I shall go home. Then, in the morning, she will meet me at the station and we will take the early train

for Boston. As soon as we can—sometime to-morrow, of course—we shall be married. Then, if I can get a stateroom and passage on the steamer, we shall—"

"Hush! Wait, wait, wait! Let me understand this plan. You aren't going to be married until to-morrow—in Boston? You were goin' to go away from Harniss *without* bein' married?"

Bob stared at her. "I told you," he said, slowly, "that I should take Esther to my cousin's house in South Denboro. I shall leave her there and go home. Look here, Miss Clark, I don't quite understand what you mean by—"

"Oh, *hush!* Mercy on us, what children you two are, after all. I am not worried about you. I know you are all right, both of you. But I am worried about what everybody else will *say*. Haven't you lived long enough to know that the average person is only too delighted to get a chance to say a mean thing? Haven't you heard what has been said about other young idiots in this town who have— Oh, but there! They shan't have the chance to say them about you. I'll see to that. Esther, take off your things. Bob, you keep yours on, for I shall want you to go out on an errand in a minute. . . . Dear, dear, dear! If we only had more time. Esther, when did your uncle expect to be back from Ostable?"

"Why, I don't know exactly. Not until late; he said that to me."

"Late! Well, I wish I knew how late. Tell me, will he know you have come here?"

"I suppose Varunas, if he is up, will tell him I sent my bag here."

"Yes, of course. And he will come chasin' down here first thing. You didn't tell him you were leavin' him for good?"

"No. I meant to write him a letter telling him why I could not live with him any longer and how terribly I felt at leaving him, although I knew it was right. But I wanted to see Bob first. I shall write that letter this evening, at South Denboro."

"No, you won't. You will write it right here in this house. That is one of the things you must do before you go to South Denboro. And it is important; but not as important as somethin' else."

"Auntie! . . . How strange you look—and act. What is it?"

"Strange! I feel strange—but I haven't got time to think about it. Oh, dear, dear! I ought to go out and open that post office this minute. Esther, come into the front room with me. Mr. Griffin will excuse us, I guess. He'll have to. Come."

She hurried her niece into the little parlor, a room of course almost never used. Bob, left in the sitting-room, heard the clink of a lamp chimney and the scratch of a match. Then the hum of hurried conversation. Esther's voice rose in an exclamation, apparently in expostulation, but her aunt's sharp command hushed it to silence. A few minutes later Reliance hurried out.

"She's writin' the note to her Uncle Foster," she explained, quickly. "Poor thing, it will be terribly hard to do. As for him, when he reads it— Well, I mustn't think about him now. For the rest, she will do it. She agreed with me that it may be best. Whether she agreed or not it would be done just the same. I know it is best."

Bob shook his head.

"If I knew what this was all about," he began, with a shrug, "I—"

"You're goin' to learn. It is just this: You aren't goin' to be married in Boston to-morrow—or to-morrow anywhere else. You are goin' to be married to-night, right here in this sittin' room, by a Harniss minister. You are goin' to be married right here where I can see it done, and be a witness to it. Then, if anybody dares to say anything out of the way, they'll have me to reckon with. . . . Don't stop to argue about it; neither of us have got time for that. I must go out and open the office and you must chase right up to Ezra Farmer's

house—Ezra's the town clerk, probably you know him—and get the license or certificate or whatever is necessary. . . . Don't talk! Don't!"

Bob did talk, of course, but not for long. Reliance's sharp, to the point sentences convinced him that she was right. Gossip—a certain kind of gossip—would be smothered before it was uttered if he and Esther were married there and then, with her aunt as witness. And, if Esther was willing, surely he was. In a daze he listened to Miss Clark's final instructions.

"That Farmer man," she said, "may sputter a little about givin' you the certificate. It's past his office hours and he may want to use that as an excuse to put you off. The real trouble is that he will be afraid of what Foster Townsend will say to him to-morrow. Don't let him scare you a mite. And, if worse comes to worst offer him four or five times his regular fee. That will stiffen his backbone—if I know Ezra."

She was flying about the sitting-room, trying to untie her apron strings with shaking fingers, and chattering continuously.

"Better not leave your horse and team out here," she said. "Some of the mail-time crowd will be sure to see it and want to know why. Take it up to the livery stable and leave it there. . . . No, I tell you what to do. Drive it right through my yard and hitch it out in the dark back of the hen house. You can walk to Farmer's; it's only a little way. . . . I'll attend to the minister myself. . . . Now is there anything else? I haven't had any supper, but never mind that. Before you go you might see to the tea kettle; it's boilin' all over the stove. . . . I'll shut up the post office at half past eight to-night and I'll be in a little while after that, minister and all. . . . I wonder now if— But there, I can't stop. Don't let Esther worry or get frightened. Everything will be all right. What a mercy I sent Millard away! I must have had a message from heaven, I guess, when I did that. . . . Be sure and make Farmer give you that certificate. . . . If there is anything else. . . . Well, if there is it will have to wait. I'll be back just as soon as I can. Don't worry."

CHAPTER XXI

AT precisely eight-thirty she turned the key in the side door of the post-office building, and, hurrying to the sidewalk, almost ran along it. Twenty minutes later, when she reëntered the yard, she was not alone. She was shooing before her, as she might have shooed a stray chicken, a thin young man, who wore eyeglasses and whose cheeks were ornamented with a pair of sidewhiskers of the kind much affected at that date by theological students or youths active in the Y. M. C. A. The irreverent laity called such whiskers "fire escapes."

The young man was the Reverend Mr. Barstow and he was the newly called minister of the Baptist chapel in Harniss. He had lived in the village less than a month. Consequently his acquaintance in the community was limited and his awe of the great Foster Townsend not yet overpowering. Reliance had chosen him with this fact in mind. Mr. Colton, the big mogul's own parson, would have found some excuse for refusing to marry a niece of that mogul to any one, without being first assured of his patron's presence or consent. To suggest that he perform a ceremony uniting her to a grandson of Elisha Cook would have been like suggesting that he commit suicide.

But the Reverend Mr. Barstow was not aware that he was being shooed into danger by the bustling, energetic woman behind him. He was young and callow and innocent and, although the haste with which he had been dragged from his study in the parsonage seemed peculiar, the thought of the fee he was to receive was very pleasing. It was his first wedding in Harniss. There had been two funerals, but funerals were not remunerative.

Miss Clark ushered him into the little sitting-room. Bob and Esther were there. Both were rather pale and nervous,

Esther especially so. Neither had before met the new minister and Reliance performed the introductions. Then she turned to Griffin.

"Did you get it?" she asked, breathlessly. "Would he give it to you?"

Bob produced from his pocket a folded document.

"I got it, finally," he said, with a smile. "It took considerable persuasion and an extra five dollar bill, but here it is."

Reliance glanced it over. "Seems to be all right," she observed. "I've never had any experience with such things, but I guess it is."

"Oh, it is. When I gave him Esther's name you should have seen his eyes open. He all but refused then. To hear him talk you would have thought Captain Townsend was—"

"Sshh!" hastily and with a glance at the minister. "Well then, I guess we are all ready to go ahead. Where do you want them to stand, Mr. Barstow? Or had you rather be married in the parlor, Esther?"

Esther shook her head. "No, Auntie," she said. "I like this room better. It is more like home than the parlor to me. If Bob—or you—don't mind I had rather it were here."

Bob, of course, did not mind and said so. Reliance glanced about the apartment.

"Oh, dear!" she sighed. "I wish I had had time to pick up a little and to get a few flowers—or somethin'. But there! I haven't had time to get my breath scarcely, have I? Is everything ready? Then I guess you can go right ahead, Mr. Barstow."

The reverend gentleman—he had already examined the marriage certificate which Griffin handed him—stepped forward. Bob and Esther stood facing him. Reliance stood further back, in the shadow.

It was, of course, the simplest of ceremonies. And soon over. The minister's prayer was longer than all the rest. As he prayed Reliance stepped back farther and farther from the lamplight. The tears were streaming down her face, but she

wiped them hastily away and at the "Amen" ran forward, beaming, her hands outstretched. She threw her arms about the bride's neck and kissed her.

"The Lord bless you, dear," she cried. "I hope he'll bless both of you always. And I know he will. Young man," turning to Bob, "I'm goin' to kiss you, too. I'm an old maid and, if I can't go to my own weddin', I expect to be kissed at other folks's. . . . There!"

Mr. Barstow lingered but a few minutes. To tell the entire truth he received no pressing invitation to remain. After he had gone Reliance turned to the wedded pair.

"I don't want to hurry you a bit," she said. "Heaven knows I don't! But it is almost ten o'clock and—well, if anybody should come here to-night, they had better not find you. It will be just as easy to explain after you have gone as before. You know what I mean, of course."

It was evident that they did. Griffin nodded.

"I am perfectly willing to explain—to Captain Townsend or any one else," he said, emphatically. "And so is Esther. We are not ashamed of what we have done."

Esther was looking at her aunt. She understood, perhaps even more clearly than did Bob, the thought in Reliance's mind. She knew what sort of scene would follow Foster Townsend's arrival.

"Oh, Auntie," she cried, distressfully, "this is terrible for you. If we go away before—before he comes—you will have to tell him, and he will blame you, and—and— No, I can't let you. I won't. Bob and I will stay—and wait."

Reliance shook her head. "Indeed you will not wait," she declared. "There is nothing to be gained by it. What is done is done, and nobody," with a momentary smile, "even the great Panjamdrum of this part of creation can change it. . . . Besides," she added, with a sudden shake in her voice, "I want *somethin'* pleasant to remember when I think of this evenin'. I have seen you married, Esther, and I want to see you and—how queer it seems to say that—your husband leave this house

happy. I don't want to remember your leavin' it in the middle of a fight. Don't worry about me. The letter you have written your uncle will tell him almost everything and I shall tell him the rest. . . . There! Now you must go. Bob, go out and get your horse and buggy."

Bob went. When he reëntered the sitting-room, he found that Miss Clark had cleared a space on the center table and had placed thereon three plates, three glasses of milk, and a chocolate cake.

"I almost forgot that you two hadn't had a mouthful to eat since dinner," she explained. "I haven't either, but I'd forgotten that, too. I only wish I could offer you somethin' worth while, but I haven't got it and there isn't time, anyway. I baked this cake yesterday. It is a real nice receipt, but I was in a hurry and it fell in the bakin'. I'm ashamed to give it to you, but it's somethin,' anyhow. . . . Oh, I know you don't feel like eatin'. Neither do I, so far as that goes. But I'll eat a piece of your weddin' cake if I choke with every swallow. So must you. Please!"

So they ate a little of the cake and drank the milk. Then Reliance shooed them, as she had shooed the Reverend Barstow, out to the buggy which Bob had brought to the door. He shook hands with her.

"I can't thank you for what you have done, Miss Clark," he began, "but—"

She interrupted. "You can stop callin' me Miss Clark," she declared. "That's one thing you can do. I'm your Aunt Reliance now, same as I am Esther's, and I shan't let you forget it. Take good care of her, won't you? She's a precious girl and you are a lucky young man."

The parting with Esther was harder for them both. Reliance tried her best to make it cheerful.

"There, there, dearie," she said, as Esther sobbed on her shoulder, "don't cry—don't cry. You have done the right thing, you've got a good husband and I know you are goin' to be happy. Write to me often, won't you? Just as soon as you

get to Boston and again as soon as you know what your plans are. And be sure and tell me where to write you. . . . Now don't cry any more."

Bob helped his wife into the buggy. From its seat she leaned down for a final word.

"Auntie," she begged, "you will tell Uncle Foster why I did this, won't you? You will tell him I *do* love him and—"

"Yes, yes. I'll tell him everything. And I'll see that he gets your letter. . . . Good-by. God bless you both. . . . Be sure and write me to-morrow from Boston. . . . Good-by."

The buggy rolled out of the yard. She stood there, looking and listening. She heard Bob get down, open the big gate, close it behind the carriage. Then the sound of the horse's hoofs moved off up the road.

Reliance waited until the sound died away. Then she turned and reëntered the sitting-room. Sitting down in the rocker, she laid her arms upon the center table, beside the empty glasses and the plate of cake, dropped her head upon them—and wept.

CHAPTER XXII

SHE did not sit there long. For a few minutes only she permitted herself the luxury of tears. Then she rose, cleared away the remains of the impromptu wedding feast, hastened out to the kitchen, bathed her face in the cold water from the pump, dried it on the roller towel, patted her hair into place, and returned to the sitting room. There was another interview in store for her that night, she was sure of it, and it was likely to be the hardest trial of all. She must be ready. So she sat down again in the rocker and tried to plan exactly what she should say to Foster Townsend when he came, demanding his niece.

She had been sitting there for perhaps twenty minutes when she heard his step upon the walk. She did not wait for him to knock, but opened the door at once.

"Come in, Foster," she said.

He did not bid her good evening, nor did he speak until he had crossed the threshold. He glanced about him, strode to the door of the room adjoining, looked in there, and turned back.

"Where is she?" he asked, sharply.

Reliance faced him bravely.

"She isn't here, Foster," she replied.

"Bosh! Of course she is here. Come, come! don't fool with me. Where is she?"

"I am not fooling, Foster. Esther isn't here. She has been here, but she has gone."

He stared at her. The expression upon her face caught and held his attention. He took a step toward her.

"Gone!" he repeated. "Gone where? . . . What do you mean?"

"I am goin' to tell you what I mean. There is a lot to tell. Foster, I— Oh, dear!" desperately, "I don't know where to begin. This is harder even than I thought it was goin' to be. Foster, you must be patient."

She had frightened him now. She heard him catch his breath.

"What is the matter with you?" he demanded. "What—!" Then his tone changed. He leaned toward her, his hand upon the center table. "Say, Reliance," he whispered, anxiously, "you are fooling, aren't you? She is in this house, isn't she? Look here, if she is hiding from me—if she has got the idea that I am mad with her or anything like that—why, she needn't be. We had a row, she and I, up at the house this noon; maybe she told you about it, I don't know. Well, that's all right. I— Here! Why do you keep looking at me like that? . . . What is that thing?"

Reliance was proffering him an envelope which she had taken from the bosom of her dress. He gazed at it, then snatched it from her hand.

"Eh?" he gasped. "It's from her, isn't it? What is she writing me letters for? . . . Good God, woman, what has happened? Where is she? Why don't you tell me?"

Reliance shook her head.

"Read your letter first," she said. "It will tell you almost everything and I will try and tell you the rest. . . . Oh, Foster," in an irrepressible burst of agonized sympathy. "I am *so* sorry for you."

She did not wait to see him open the envelope, but ran into the kitchen and closed the door behind her. She remained there for perhaps ten minutes, it seemed much longer to her. When she reëntered the sitting room he was seated in the rocker, the letter which Esther had written him dangling in his limp fingers, and upon his face a look which wrung her heart-strings. She came toward him and laid her hand upon his shoulder.

"I am *so* sorry for you, Foster," she said again.

He scarcely seemed to notice her presence. He did not speak.

"You have read the letter?" she faltered, after a moment.

He heard her then and straightened in the chair.

"I have read it," he muttered. "Yes, I've read it."

"Well—you see? It is done now and we can't change it. So—"

He threw her hand from his shoulder and rose to his feet, crumpling the letter in his fist as he did so. He snatched his hat from the floor where it had fallen.

"Change it!" he growled, between his teeth. "We'll see whether we can change it or not. If that low-lived son of a skunk thinks he has got me licked I'll show him he is mistaken. He has made a fool of her with his slick tongue, but he hasn't married her yet, and it's a long time between now and morning. . . . Get out of my way!"

He would have pushed her aside but she clung to his arm.

"Wait—wait!" she begged. "You must wait. You don't understand. He *has* married her. They were married an hour ago. She is his wife."

He stopped short. She still clung to him, but, as he made no move to go, she loosed her hold. When she looked up into his face she was shocked and alarmed.

"Foster—Foster!" she urged. "Please—please! Come and sit down. Let me tell you all about it. There is so much to tell. You can't do anything. It is too late. No one could have stopped it. I tried my best, but— Oh, please sit down and listen!"

She led him toward the chair. He sat and, bending forward, leaned his head upon his hands.

"Go ahead," he groaned. "I'm listening."

She told him the whole story, beginning with her learning from Millard of his experience the night of the accident, of her early morning call upon the Campton girl, of her long talk with Esther, at the big house and afterward there at the cottage. Then she went on to tell how Esther and Bob Griffin had come

to say good-by, how she had argued and pleaded to shake their determination to go away together that very night. Then of the marriage.

"What could I do?" she pleaded, desperately. "They wouldn't listen. They would go. There was only one thing I saw that must be done and I did it. I saw them married, legally married by a Harniss minister right in this very room. We've got that to be thankful for—and it's a lot. There can't be any gossip started, for I can nail it before it starts. Foster, as I see it, all you can do—all any of us can do—is make the best of it. Tell the whole town you think it is all right, even if you are sure it is all wrong. And it isn't all wrong. It is terribly hard for you to give her up to somebody else, but you would have had to do it sometime. And she has got a good husband; as sure as I stand here I do believe that."

She finished. Still he sat there, his head upon his hands. She ventured once more to put her hand upon his shoulder.

"If you knew how I have been dreadin' your comin' here to-night," she said, wearily. "If you only knew! If only somebody else could have told you. But there wasn't any one else; I had to do it. You *poor* man! I—I Oh, dear! What a world this is! Foster, you *will* believe I am sorry, won't you?' '

He drew a deep breath. Then, placing his hands upon the chair arm, he slowly lifted his big body and stood erect. His face was haggard, his eyes heavy, he looked, so she thought, as if he had been through a long sickness. And the tone in which he spoke was hollowed and, at first, listless.

"Sorry!" he repeated. "Sorry! Humph! . . . Yes, I guess so. You are sorry and so is she—she says so in her letter. I suppose that damned cub she has run away with is sorry, too. Yes, you are all sorry, but not so sorry but what you could do the thing, play the dirty trick you meant to play all along. . . . All right! All right!" with sudden savageness. "She will be sorrier by and by. Let her go to the devil. She has started that way already. Let her go. And you, and the gang who

will come tiptoeing around to-morrow telling me how sorry they are, may go with her. . . . Well, you have said all you wanted to, haven't you? I can go home now, I suppose—eh?"

She stepped back. "Yes," she agreed, sadly. "I guess you can, if you want to. I was afraid you would take it this way; it is natural you should, I guess. I hope, though, by and by, when you have had time to think it all over, you may be a little more reconciled and, maybe, not quite so bitter. What has happened isn't really any one's fault. You must see that; you will by and by. You couldn't have stopped it; I couldn't; nobody could. It just happened, same as lots of things happen to us poor humans. Whether we like 'em or not doesn't seem to make a bit of difference. They happen, just the same."

He turned on her, looked her over from head to foot. "Good Lord A'mighty!" he sneered. "Good Lord! I have lived a good many years and I thought I had run afoul of about every kind of cussedness there was, but this beats 'em all. Isn't there *any* limit? Wasn't it bad enough to play the hypocrite when there was something to be gained by it, when it helped me to keep my eyes shut to what was going on behind my back? Wasn't that enough, without playing it now? Nobody's fault! Huh! It was somebody's fault—oh, yes! It was mine for being such a blind, innocent jackass as to trust her—and you. Ah-h! . . . There, that is enough."

It was more than enough, it was a little too much. Reliance stepped between him and the door.

"Foster Townsend," she cried, "you shan't go until you take that back, or at least hear what I have to say about it. You know I'm not a hypocrite. That is one thing I never have been. And, since you said it yourself first, you are right, partly right, when you say it was your fault. If you hadn't been just what you always have been, so set on drivin' everybody along the road you wanted 'em to travel, you and Esther might not have come to this pass. You couldn't have stopped her marryin' the Griffin boy—I don't believe all creation could have done that—but you might have held it off for a while, and saved

all this dreadful business. You couldn't drive her. Every time you tried it you got into trouble. And now this! She is a Townsend, just as you are yourself."

"Townsend! Bah! She is a Clark, that's what she is. Her father was a Townsend and he was a soft-headed fool; but he wasn't a hypocrite. She's a Clark, that's where the hypocrisy comes from."

"Stop! You shan't say that! There wasn't any hypocrisy at all, on my part or hers. You know it. I have been honest with you from the very beginnin'. That day, years ago, when she went to live with you, I warned you to be careful. I knew you, and I knew her, and I warned you that you couldn't force her to draw her every breath just at the second when you told her to. I had seen you drive and drive her poor father, and I saw that road end in smash, just as this one has ended. And you mustn't call her a hypocrite, either. She has been honest with you always—except perhaps for those few days when she let Bob Griffin paint her picture without tellin' you about it. But have you played straight and aboveboard with her? You can answer that yourself, but I tell you she doesn't think you have. And I tell you the plain truth when I say that nobody, short of the Almighty himself, could have stopped what has happened to-night. You be thankful it happened as it did—here in this house, with a friend—yes, a good friend, and there's no hypocrisy about that either—to see it done and keep every mean mouth in Harniss shut tight. You can be thankful for that, Foster Townsend, I give you my word *I* am."

He was standing there, his hand upon the latch. Now, as she paused, breathless, the fires of righteous indignation still burning in her eyes, he carried that hand to his face. A sob shook him.

"Oh, don't!" he groaned. "For God's sake, don't! Let me out of here! Let me get away—somewhere."

And then, of all inopportune times, Fate chose that moment to bring Millard Fillmore Clark upon the scene. The door opened and he came into the room. He looked at his sister,

then at her visitor. His backbone suppled; his hat was removed with a flourish.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed, in polite surprise. "It is you, ain't it, Cap'n Foster. How do you do, sir?" Then, as the possibilities of the situation crossed his mind, he added, a little more anxiously: "You and Reliance been havin' a little talk about—about what you and me talked about yesterday? I—I thought it was best to tell her, you understand."

He might have said more, probably would had the opportunity been given him. It was not. Foster Townsend's big hand shot forward, seized him by the shoulder and threw him headlong from the doorway. He spun across the room, tripped over the hassock, and fell sprawling. Before he could rise, or even understand what had happened to him, Townsend had gone.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE letter for which Reliance had so anxiously waited came in the evening mail next day. Esther had written it from Boston. She had spent the night at the house of Bob's cousin in South Denboro, and she and her husband had taken the early train from that station, as they had planned. They were going at once to the steamship office to see what arrangements could be made for their passage to Europe. She would write again as soon as those arrangements were made. Bob had broken the news to his grandfather and there had been another distressing scene.

"It is all so dreadful," wrote Esther, "that I don't want to think about it now. Poor Bob! And poor Mr. Cook! And Uncle Foster! And you, Auntie! I feel as if I must be a wicked, ungrateful girl. He says I am not and that we have done the only thing that could be done. He is a dear fellow and I love him. He is sure we will never be sorry and that by and by everything will be right again. Oh, I hope so! . . . You will tell Uncle Foster how sorry I was to leave him, won't you? *Make* him understand just why I had to do it, Aunt Reliance. And then write me what he says. I will write him as soon as I hear from you that he cares to have me write. *Do* you think he will ever forgive me?"

Reliance felt no certainty on this point. She had not seen Foster Townsend that day. Nor had she heard from him. Varunas came for the mail, as usual, but he had nothing to tell. "The old man is glum as an oyster," he said. "Ain't hardly spoke a word all day and Nabby she's scared he's goin' to be sick or somethin'. Say, where's Esther gone? I thought likely she was down here to your house, Reliance, but Millard says she ain't. He's struck dumb, too, seems so. What's the matter with all hands?"

His question was answered next morning. Where, or from where, the amazing rumor first came is uncertain. Whether the Reverend Mr. Barstow told of the marriage ceremony, or Ezra Farmer told of issuing the certificate—whether the news was first made public in Denboro, or South Denboro, or there in Harniss, is still but a guess. And very few guessed or tried. The essential fact was all that mattered. Within a dozen hours the whole county buzzed. The great Foster Townsend's niece had married the grandson of the almost as famous Elisha Cook. They were married and had run away together to Boston—to Chicago—to Europe—to nobody knew for certain where. Mrs. Benjamin Snow said, "Heavens and earth!" when she heard it. Mrs. Tobias Eldridge said, "My good land of love!" Every one said something and followed it with: *"What* will Foster Townsend do? Has anybody seen him since it happened?"

No one had, for he had kept out of their way. The few who called at the mansion—Mr. Colton, Captain Ben Snow, and others who had a claim to close acquaintanceship—were told by the maid or Nabby Gifford that he was busy with "law papers" and could not see anybody. Reliance Clark was the next best bet and they hurried to the post office. Reliance was quite willing to talk, up to a certain point. Yes, it was true. Esther Townsend was now Mrs. Robert Griffin. They had been married in her sitting-room by the Baptist minister and she was present at the wedding. Why the haste? Was it true that they had run off? Did Foster Townsend know of it before it happened? Where were they now? All these queries she parried or answered non-committally. To too-persistent questioners, of a certain type, she replied in another fashion. "If you are so terribly anxious to know how Cap'n Townsend takes it," she observed, "why don't you go and ask him? Bob and Esther are married. That much I do know. And you can advertise it to all creation."

This was so far the greatest sensation of a sensational season. Following so closely upon the accident to Seymour Covell

it drove even that and its trail of gossip and surmise from the public mind. The whisperings concerning Bob Griffin's part in that accident, or his responsibility for it, were forgotten. Covell, in the Boston hospital, was reported to have regained consciousness and to be on the road to recovery. The question of what he was doing on the lower road—of who saw him and Griffin there, if indeed any one saw them—ceased to be debated. Carrie Campton and her parents began to breathe more easily. So did Millard Clark, although breathing was practically the only luxury his sister permitted him to indulge in just then. Millard's position was hard indeed. To be an inmate of the very house in which the amazing marriage had taken place, to be as wildly excited concerning it as every one else, and to be ordered to hush, or be still, or to mind his own business whenever he dared venture to hint a request for inside information, was torture indeed for Mr. Clark. And, worst of all, his orders—orders which, in fear of Foster Townsend and his sister, he did not dare disobey—were to say that he knew nothing and keep on saying it. "It is the truth," declared Reliance. "You don't know anything and, so far as I am concerned, you never will. And, if my shoulder was as lame as yours is, I don't think I should run the risk of doin' anything likely to bring Cap'n Foster down on me again. He might break your neck next time."

Many pairs of eyes were on the watch for the first public appearance of the big mogul. He would have to show himself sometime and when he did—how would he look and act? What would he have to say? They knew already what Elisha Cook was saying. According to Denboro reports he declared himself to be through with his grandson for good and all. "He is a fool, let him go his fool way. I'm done with him." This, according to gossip, was the proclamation from Cook headquarters. And the Denboro doctor was reported to have added that the old man's sole comfort in the situation was the thought of Foster Townsend's fury. "I only wish I was where I could see him squirm," chuckled Elisha.

So all Harniss was agog, and rushed excitedly to its windows when, two days after the elopement, the Townsend span was again seen trotting majestically along the main road. Varunas, of course, was driving and his employer sat alone upon the rear seat of the carriage. He looked heavy-eyed and drawn and tired, that was the consensus of opinion, but to the bows and hat lifting of those he passed his own bow was as coolly dignified as ever. It was noon—mail time—and the group at the post office watched, with bated breath, as he alighted and walked into the building.

Tobias Eldridge told it all to his wife when he reached home.

"Everybody just stood around, or set on the settee, and looked at him when he come in," narrated Tobias. "We didn't none of us hardly dast to speak, or so much as say, 'How are you, Cap'n Foster?' Didn't know how he'd take it, you understand. But he was just same as ever, seemed so. Just as grand and top lofty and off-hand to us bugs and worms under his feet as if nothin' had happened. When somebody—Nathan Doane, seems to me 'twas—spunked up enough to say 'Good day,' he nodded his head and says 'Good day' back. Course he must know that every man, woman and child old enough to talk has been talkin' about nothing but him and his family for two days and nights. You'd think he'd realize it and act sort of—well, fussed and ashamed, but not him, no sir! Darned if it wasn't kind of disappointin'! Yes, 'twas so.

"And," went on Mr. Eldridge, "when he went up to the window after his mail and Reliance Clark handed it out to him, we was all set to see how he'd act to her. 'Twas in her house them two was married and we didn't know but he'd tell her what he thought of her right there and then. And what happened? *Nothin'!*" in high disgust. "Nothin' at all! 'Good mornin', Foster,' says she, not lookin' even so much as nervous. 'Mornin', Reliance,' he says; grunted it just same as he's grunted good mornin' to her for two year. And that's

all there was to it. Can you beat that? *I* don't know how you're goin' to."

It was an attitude that could not be beaten and reluctantly Harniss was forced to that realization. At home, when the inevitable callers came, eager to learn details, ready to offer sympathy and express indignation at Esther's wickedness, it was just the same. Foster Townsend flatly refused to discuss the subject. The Reverend Mr. Colton ventured to persist a trifle more than the rest.

"Of course, Captain Townsend," he said, sadly, "we all know the burden you are bearing. If you knew—I shall be glad to tell you if you wish to hear—the expressions of sympathy for you which are poured into my ears, they might perhaps comfort you a little. And the poor, misguided girl! Ungrateful—yes. But—"

Townsend, who was standing by the chair in the library, a cigar in one hand and a match in the other, swung about.

"Here, here!" he broke in, gruffly. "What is all this about sympathy? Sympathy for what?"

The minister was taken aback. "Why—why," he faltered, "I mean— Why, we all know what a shock to you this—this must be. Your niece—"

"Sshh!" The match was scratched and held to the end of the cigar. Townsend blew a puff of smoke. "Colton," he observed, in a tone so polite as to be almost ominous, "you came here to talk about church business, didn't you? That was what I understood you to say you came for."

"Why—why, yes, I did. But, in my position as—as a friend of long standing, as well as your clergyman, I ventured—"

"In a business talk I like to stick to business. And," with a slight emphasis, "the church *is* your business. Well, what about it?"

He came to church the following Sunday and on other Sundays thereafter. His attendance was far more regular than it had been while Esther lived in the big house. It seemed almost as if he made it a point to be seen in public and to

show to that public a countenance serene, unruffled, dignified—even defiant. He visited the post office every day, sometimes twice a day. His trotting horses began once more to show their paces about the Circle. Varunas Gifford was delighted, of course. "The old man's gettin' sensible again," declared Varunas. "Was a time there when I snum it seemed as if he never cared two cents whether Claribel or Hornet or any of the rest of 'em could trot fast enough to get out of the way of an ox team. Never paid no attention to 'em, scurcely. Now he's beginnin' to show some signs of life! talkin' about Sam Baker again, he is, and askin' what kind of cattle Sam is cal'latin' to send around the track over to Ostable when it comes Fair time. Looks to me as if I might be sailin' around that track myself and fetchin' a few dollars into port for him, same as I used to. Nabby, she's growlin' about it already, says I'm gettin' too old for horse-racin'. 'Gosh!' I told her, says I, 'don't you fret yourself about that. When I get so old I can't drive a trottin' gig I'll be just about old enough to have somebody else drive me in a hearse. Say,' I says to her—He, he!—'make 'em hitch a couple of high steppers onto that hearse, won't you, Nabby. I wouldn't want nobody to beat me to the cemetery.' *That* stirred her up. He, he!"

Reliance had received one more letter from Esther. It, like the first one, was written from Boston. She and Bob had been obliged to wait another week before sailing for Europe. That week had gone and they had sailed. Presumably they were in Paris now and Reliance was anxiously awaiting a third letter which should tell of their arrival and what had transpired since. Day after day she had been hoping that Foster Townsend might come to see her and that, as a result of their interview, she could write Esther that her uncle would, if not welcome, at least receive and read, a letter from her. But her hope was dying. Townsend did not call. She saw him almost daily through the little delivery window of the post office, but, although they exchanged greetings, his was always

perfunctory and in his manner was no hint of a desire for conversation.

But once only had a message come to her from the big house. This was at the end of the week following the elopement, when Varunas, in the Townsend two-seater, brought Esther's trunk to the Clark cottage. Mr. Gifford had much to say concerning his errand.

"It's the cap'n's doin's," he explained. "He told Nabby to pack up Esther's things and have me fetch 'em down to you. 'What'll I tell her to do with 'em?' says I. He just glowered at me and walked away. 'She can do what she wants to with 'em,' he growled, over his shoulder. 'I don't want to know what she does. Don't you mention 'em to me again.' So that's what I know about it, and it ain't much. Say," he added, "there was a whole lot more things of hers around. Not clothes, you know, but—oh, well, photograph pictures and knickknacks and doodads, all sorts of junk she's picked up around, when he and she was off cruisin' and travelin' and the like of that. He made Nabby pick up every one of them things and stow 'em away out of sight. Seem's if he couldn't bear to have anything that belonged to her 'round where he was liable to lay eyes on it. There was only one item he left off the bill of ladin' and that was kind of queer, too—queer he should leave that out, I mean. There was a big photograph of her on the settin' room mantel-piece. You've seen it; you know the one 'twas. Naturally Nabby cal'lated that would be the first thing he'd be for gettin' out of sight. Well, 'tis out of sight, so far as that goes, but where he's put it we don't know. 'Tain't in this trunk and it ain't with the stuff Nabby's hid up attic. What do you suppose he's ever done with that photograph, Reliance?"

Reliance sent the trunk to Esther at her Boston address, hoping it would reach her before the date of sailing. Whether it did or not she had not yet heard. She made it a point to see Mrs. Gifford occasionally and from her learned what was taking place at the mansion.

"It's about the same as it used to be," declared Nabby. "Reminds me of that time just after his wife passed away, I mean. He sits around in the library all by himself, readin' the paper and smokin' his cigar. Smokes too much, he does, and I tell him so. Sometimes when I go in there, he won't be readin' at all; just settin' in his big chair, puffin' away, and lookin' at nothin'. It makes me feel bad to see him so, but if I mention it he takes my head off. He is prouder than ever and touchier than ever. Cap'n Ben Snow comes to see him and so does the minister and some of the other folks, but, so far as I can make out, he don't ever go to see them. About the most pitiful sight is to see him, early mornin' afore breakfast, out mopin' around the flower garden all alone. 'Bella—his wife, I mean —she set a lot of store by that garden and Esther set about as much. You'd almost think he'd keep away from it, think 'twould be the last place he'd want to see, but he's there 'most every mornin'. He's a queer man, and always was, but I know I never felt so sorry for anybody in all my days. . . . If I told that to anybody but you, Reliance, they'd laugh. They'd think bein' sorry for Foster Townsend was about as silly as bein' sorry for the Governor of Massachusetts—or—or the President of the Old Colony Railroad or somebody, wouldn't they?

"You know how I hate horse trottin'," she went on, "but I do declare if I ain't almost happy to see him takin' an interest in it again. Yes, and he's gettin' back in politics some, too. They help to take up his mind, so I don't complain, though I do wish some of them Selectmen and Represent'ives and Pound-keepers, or whatever they be, knew enough to wipe their boots when they come in on a decent, clean floor. Yes, horses and politics and that everlastin' lawsuit and lawyers do a little to keep him busy. I don't know how much the lawyers help, though; it does look to me as if they worried him as much as they helped lately. He used to love that lawsuit. I only hope nothin's gone wrong with *that*."

The long expected letter from Paris came at last. It cov-

ered many pages and was, on the whole, reassuring and comforting. The trunk had been received in time. The voyage was a marvelous experience. Paris was the most beautiful city in the whole world. They—Esther and Bob—had lodgings in a funny little out of the way street, where no one save themselves spoke English, and where Esther had to make her wants known by signs "just like a deaf and dumb person, although Bob says there is nothing dumb about our landlady. I say a few words in English and she says a thousand in French, but it doesn't get us anywhere. It will though, Auntie, pretty soon. I shall learn to speak French if I die for it. I can read it a little already; my music studies helped me there. You will be glad to know that I am keeping on with those studies. Not in the grand way I used to think I should, but a little and inexpensively. Bob is having a glorious time with his painting. The masters at the classes have said most encouraging things. We—"

And so on, page after page. Reliance gathered that the young couple were very, very happy. There were no signs of doubt as to the wisdom of their hasty marriage.

At the end Esther wrote:

"And in every letter, Aunt Reliance, be sure and write me a lot about Uncle Foster. Do you think he has begun to feel any more reconciled? Oh, I hope he has! Remember, I am waiting to hear from you before writing him. The moment you say that I may I shall do it."

Reliance sighed when she read this. So far no hint of softening or change of feeling on Foster Townsend's part had reached her ear. As far as she could learn his resentment against his niece was quite as bitter. Yes, and the bitterness extended to her—Reliance—also. He never visited her, he was cold and formal when they met. He spoke to her, but that was all she could truthfully say. She could only advise Esther to wait a little longer before venturing upon a letter to him.

The fall drew to an end and winter came. The Townsend

horses were entered in the races at the Ostable County Fair and Cattle Show and won a goodly share of prizes. Huge elation and much vainglorious boasting on the part of Varunas Gifford, of course. Nabby said—quoting her husband—that Captain Foster did not appear greatly excited over his triumph.

"Wouldn't crow over it at all, so Varunas says," declared Nabby. "And told Varunas to shut up when he crowed too long. Only signs of real interest he showed was the way he bet. Varunas says he never knew the cap'n to bet so many times or so much money. Kind of acted foolish about it, or as if he didn't care what he did, so long's 'twas somethin'. Yet—this is more of Varunas's talk, of course—when them bets was paid him, and when he got the prizes, or purses or whatever you call 'em, he didn't seem to care much about them either. Just shoved the money in his pocket without countin' it. Well, his not carin' about the money he gets that way don't fret me. I don't like to have him gamble, though. It's a bad sign, no matter how rich a man is. Why, he might start drinkin' next. Some of them politicians from out of town that come to see him last night had been takin' somethin' stronger than cambric tea, I tell you that, Reliance Clark. I smelt 'em when I opened the door, and 'twan't Florida water I smelt neither. The Honorable Mooney was one. They tell me he's goin' to be elected Congressman to Washin'ton this fall sure."

He was, by the customary—at that period—huge Republican majority. Townsend took an active part in the campaign. Through the winter he continued active in local politics, although he did not attend the February town meeting. In April he left Harniss for Washington. The famous Townsend-Cook lawsuit was to have its hearing before the Supreme Court. The final verdict would be reached at last.

The eager crowds at the post office snatched the newspapers from Millard Clark's hands day after day. Harniss resented the small amount of space given by the Boston dailies to the town's all-absorbing topic. Often there was not a word about

the great trial. Only in the *Item* was its progress reported as it should be, for there, what the editor lacked in authentic news he made up by quoting opinions and guesses throughout the county.

And one day, near the end of April, a telegram came to Captain Benjamin Snow from his Boston bankers. It was brief, but stunning.

"Just had word from Washington over the wire," so read the telegram. "Cook has won the suit."

CHAPTER XXIV

THAT telegram was handed to Captain Ben by the depot-master who was also the telegraph operator. He watched the expression on the captain's face during the reading of the dispatch.

"Say," he demanded, excitedly, "you don't suppose that is so, do you, Cap'n?"

Snow was staring at the yellow slip. He breathed hard. Then he shook his head.

"Can't be!" he declared. "No, no! It can't be. How can it?"

"But that man says he's just got the word right from Washin'ton. Good Lord! Why—"

"Sshh! There must be a mistake somewhere. How *can* it be so? Here, don't you tell anybody about this. Keep your mouth shut until we find out more, anyhow. If it is a mistake—and in spite of everything I believe it must be—you nor I don't want to get ourselves into trouble by spreadin' the news around. Wait! Don't you tell a soul; do you hear?"

The depot-master nodded. "I hear," he observed. "You needn't worry. I don't shove my toe under Foster Townsend's boot until I know what I'm doin'. I've seen too many toes jammed that way. I won't say nothin'. . . . But, good heavens above, Cap'n Ben, suppose it *is* true! Foster Townsend licked by Elisha Cook! . . . Aw, it *can't* be."

All the way home the captain kept telling himself that very thing—it could not be. The Boston broker was a trustworthy man, one not likely to accept an unsubstantiated rumor, but nevertheless— No, there was a mistake somewhere, there must be. Captain Ben, as usual when in trouble or perplexed, took council with his wife. He handed her the telegram.

"It can't be so, can it, Mary?" he demanded. "You don't believe it, do you?"

Mrs. Snow dazedly shook her head. "I declare I don't know what to believe, Ben," she said. "It doesn't seem as if it *could* be, but—but I suppose it might. Of course Elisha Cook and his lawyers must have thought they had a good chance or they wouldn't have kept on fighting the way they have."

Her husband nodded. "But for Foster—for Foster Townsend to be beat, to have anybody stop *him* from having his own way, why—why, it doesn't seem possible," he vowed.

"I know; I know it doesn't. . . . But, Ben, things haven't been going as smooth with him lately. Seems almost as if he started to slide down hill away back last summer and has kept sliding. First, there was that accident to Mr. Covell and all the talk it stirred up."

"I know, but he didn't have anything to do with that."

"It was around him and those in his house that the talk settled. There was something about that accident that has never been cleared up. Bob Griffin was mixed up in it and the next thing we knew he had run away with Esther. We all know what a blow that was to Captain Foster. He won't talk about it, of course, but it was a terrible set-back for him. And now, if this should be true—well, I know what will be said. People will say pride always goes before a fall; that is what they will say."

Her husband snorted. "Say!" he repeated. "They will say enough. Dear, dear! I hope this won't mean that Foster is going to be too hard hit, in a money way. Once—a good while ago, it was, the time when the news came that Cook had been granted his appeal to the Supreme Court—he said to me then: 'Well, Ben,' he says, 'I've bet all but my Sunday shirt on this particular horse. Looks now as if I might have a chance to bet that.' It was more than he ever said before or since, but it set me wondering. Tut, tut, tut!" gloomily. "If he should be hard hit and have to really come down in the world there will be a lot of mean little mud frogs hopping out of

their holes to croak at him, won't there. He hits right and left when he's mad and he has left a good many sore heads up and down Ostable County. This will be their chance—if it is true."

The evening papers confirmed the tidings brought by the telegram. Elisha Cook had won his suit and the amount of damages granted him was large indeed. Foster Townsend was a wealthy man, how wealthy no one knew save himself, but even a millionaire would find it hard to pay such a sum. The "mud frogs" emerged from their holes and croaked and the summary of their croakings was to the effect that chickens had come home to roost. "He's been stampin' all hands under foot for twenty years, now he's stamped on, himself. Let's see how he likes it." The croakers foresaw ruin, utter and complete. Even the great man's staunchest followers, members of what the hitherto crushed minority had referred to as "the Townsend gang," were stunned to silence by the newspaper details of the Cook triumph. In Denboro, a certain section of it, there was rejoicing. "This neighborhood is on the map again," crowed the Denborites. "We shan't have to crawl on our knees through Harniss when we want our rights, in politics or anything else. It's our turn now."

From Provincetown to Wapatomac there was chatter of this kind. In political circles certain heads were raised and hopes, hitherto moribund, began to revive. The county boss had been beaten. His infallibility was a thing of the past. If beaten in one way, why not in others? The Honorable Mooney, now a Representative of his state in the halls of Congress at Washington, began to hear from other galled jades who, like himself, had winced beneath the Townsend whip.

And, at the end of the week, while the excitement was still boiling, the big mogul returned to his native town. Varunas and the span were at the station to meet him. Mr. Gifford's was a broken spirit now. At first defiant and scornful, scoffing at the rumors of his employer's defeat, as those rumors changed to certainties his attitude changed with them. Still outwardly

lofty and calm, he met every taunt with sniffs of contemptuous pity. "It don't mean nothin'," he asserted. "You fellers are hollerin' your heads off, but wait till the old man gets through with this business. Them Supreme Courters are goin' to lose their jobs, some of 'em. Ye-ah, all right, you wait and see. There's a law against bribery and corruption, ain't there? The President of the United States ain't had his say about this case yet. You hold on. You'll be meek enough by and by. Huh!"

This to the world at large. But, at home, with his wife, it was different. Nabby was as downcast as he.

"I declare if I believed in spirits and warnin's and them kind of things," she sighed, "I'd have been more prepared for it. It started by his lettin' that Bob Griffin into this house. I ought to have seen that there was a 'sign' in that. First a Cook begins to come here; then he gets poor Mr. Covell kicked out of the way by a horse; then he runs off with Esther. And now this! What does the Good Book say? 'The way of the transgressor is hard,' that's what it says."

Varunas pooh-poohed. "What's that got to do with it?" he demanded. "Cap'n Foster never transgressed nothin'. 'Twas Griffin that was the transgressor and *his* way is pretty soft, if you ask me. The good book says lots of things. It says somethin' about heavin' bread on the waters, if I recollect right. If you'd done that with this saleratus biscuit I'm tryin' to eat just now 'twould have sunk, I'll bet."

Mr. Gifford, awaiting his employer at the station, was outwardly serene but inwardly fearful. Would the great man whom he worshiped, of whose majesty he had so often boasted, step from that train a broken, humiliated wreck? Would he slink away from the curious crowd there gathered to watch his homecoming?

He did not. The Gifford apprehensions along that line were groundless. Foster Townsend, when he crossed the platform to the dog-cart, was, to all appearances, quite unchanged. He acknowledged the bows and good-days with his usual

careless condescension. He greeted Varunas with the accustomed gruff "Hello!" He even insisted upon taking the reins himself and driving the span along the main road to the gate of the mansion. The "mud frogs" were disappointed.

And disappointed they continued to be, for a while at least. Little by little tales of changes in the Townsend régime began to circulate. It was said that all the trotting horses were to be sold, that already several large tracts of land belonging to Townsend in various parts of the town had been put up for sale. Captain Snow, on a visit to Boston, learned from his broker, a close friend of the senior partner in a firm handling the Townsend stock transactions, that bonds and shares amounting to many thousands of dollars had been turned into money for their former owner. The second maid at the big house had been given a month's notice. These were the stories, and there were many more. No one could vouch for their truth in entirety. Townsend disclosed nothing. His stops at the post office were less frequent. He remained at home in the evenings. Sometimes callers came and with them, even the most loyal of friends and satellites, he was no more confidential than ever concerning his private affairs. How badly he was hit and how greatly his circumstances would be reduced by the loss of the famous suit no one learned from him. From Denboro, of course, came more news. Elisha Cook was a rich man now, although it was said that his lawyers would get much more than half of the sum awarded by the Court. He was triumphant, vaingloriously so, but his health was poor and people believed he would live but a few years to enjoy his sudden rise to affluence.

In all Harniss there was but one person whose calls at the big house, it was noticed, were frequent and appeared to be welcome. That person was Reliance Clark. Her first visit was made the afternoon of the day following Townsend's return from Washington. She came by the path across the fields and knocked at the kitchen door. Nabby, who answered the knock, was surprised to see her—surprised and not too cordial.

In Nabby's mind Reliance was associated with Esther's desertion of her uncle and the humiliating elopement with the grandson of the loathed Elisha Cook. Mrs. Clifford, like many another female, old or young, in Harniss, had never quite forgotten the charming personality of young Mr. Covell. She had hinted and prophesied much, at sewing-circle or after prayer-meeting, concerning the match to be made between him and the Townsend niece. Since the night of the runaway marriage her lot, that of false prophet, had been unpleasant. The innuendoes and sly taunts from friends and acquaintances were hard to bear. Her husband had been particularly irritating on the subject. It was in Reliance's sitting-room that the marriage had taken place and Nabby was convinced that she was largely responsible for the family disgrace. And now, with every tongue in the county clacking over the new thunderbolt which had struck the house of Townsend, for this woman to appear at its door, demanding to see its owner, was nothing short of brazen.

"Yes, he is in," she admitted, reluctantly, "but I don't believe he'll want to see you. He don't want to see anybody. I guess likely you'd better come some other time."

She would have closed the door, but Reliance calmly pushed it open and entered the kitchen.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"He's in the library, I suppose; at least he was there last time I looked. But he won't want to see you, I tell you. Why, look at the folks—the kind of folks—that's been here to-day. Cap'n Snow—and he wouldn't see him. And Mr. Colton, the minister of his own church, and he wouldn't even see him. Do you suppose likely if he turned *that* kind of folks away he'll want to see—well—anybody? . . . Why, where are you goin'? Didn't you hear what I said?"

Reliance had heard but she paid no attention. She walked calmly from the kitchen to the dining room. Nabby, after a moment of petrified resentment, ran after her and reached the library first.

"Cap'n Foster," she cried, breathlessly, "there's somebody

here to see you. It ain't my fault. I told 'em you didn't want to see anybody. I said those very words. They'd ought to have been enough, I should *think.*"

But Reliance had entered and now spoke for herself.

"Good afternoon, Foster," she said. "You'll see me for a minute or two, won't you? I hope you will."

Foster Townsend was sitting in the leather chair. When the housekeeper burst into the room he looked up with a frown. As he recognized his caller he slowly leaned back. It was the first time she had entered that house since Esther left it.

"Humph!" he observed. "It's you, eh?" He was silent for an instant, then he turned to the perturbed Mrs. Gifford.

"All right, Nabby," he said. "You can go."

Nabby was expectantly awaiting orders to show the intruder to the door. Her cheeks, puffed with righteous indignation, collapsed like punctured balloons. "Wh—what?" she gasped.

"You can go. Shut the kitchen door after you. Go along."

Nabby went, under protest, muttering all the way to the kitchen. Townsend thrust his hands into his trousers' pockets. His face, as he raised it to meet Reliance's look, was expressionless.

"Well?" he asked. Then, with a grim smile he added: "Come for a look at the remains, have you? Are you satisfied? Do I look natural?"

She took a step toward him and put out her hand impulsively. "Don't, Foster," she protested. "Don't talk that way."

"Why not?" still smiling. "All hands know I am dead. You must have heard them preaching my funeral sermon for a week. . . . Well, well," with sudden impatience, "let's make the ceremony as simple as possible. What is it you have come for? What do you want?"

"I don't want anything. And I came—because—oh, I've been thinkin' of you night and day ever since we all heard about it. And since yesterday, when Millard told he saw you at the depot, I—well, I have been thinkin' of you more than ever,

if that is possible. Of you, sittin' here all alone in this great house."

He shrugged. "Kindly omit flowers," he said.

She sighed. "You make it hard for me, don't you," she said. "Well, I expected you would. May I sit down a minute?"

He hesitated. Then he took a hand from his pocket and motioned to the rocker at the other side of the table. "Sit down, if you want to," he said.

She sat in the rocker. "I shan't stay very long," she began. "Foster, tell me: Is this *very* bad? They are sayin'—oh, they are sayin' all sorts of things. I read the papers, of course. It seems like a terrible lot of money. You don't have to tell me if you don't want to, but I have heard so much. Is it—will this—"

He finished the sentence for her and in his own way.

"Will it put me in the poorhouse, you mean?" he suggested. "I presume likely some of my charitable friends are picking out my room there already. Well, no, it won't do that—quite. They are going to be disappointed. I shall have something left."

"Of course you will. Any sane person would know that, of course."

"Humph! Would they? I don't know why. But I shall—a little. At least so my lawyers seem to think."

"Must you—must you really pay Elisha Cook all those thousands and thousands of dollars? Have you got to do it?"

He straightened.

"I'll pay the last dollar," he declared, sharply. "And it won't be paid in notes dated fifty years after death or anything like that. It will be paid cash down, and just as soon as that cash can be raised. You can tell that to any prying busybody that asks you."

She sighed again. "I can hardly believe you have lost that suit," she said. "I—why, everybody took it for granted you would win. I don't see how those Supreme Court folks could do such a thing."

His lip curled. "I was a little surprised myself," he admitted. "So were Cook and his gang, I rather guess. . . . And yet, maybe I ought to have expected it. Things have been going that way with me lately. . . . Well, is there anything else you want to say—or find out?"

She hesitated. "Why, yes, there is," she said. "I hardly know how to say it, either. Foster, you'll have to get rid of—to sell some of your property to pay this awful lot of money, won't you? That is what they are sayin' around town. Please don't mind my askin'. It's more my business than it sounds. I'll tell you why in a minute."

He crossed his knees. "I shall sell about everything before I get through, I suppose," he replied.

"Not this house? You won't have to give up this lovely house?"

"No. At least I don't think so. I shall hang on to it till the last gun fires, anyhow."

"Foster, you own the house I live in. If—this was what I really came to tell you—if you feel you ought to sell that house along with other things I don't want you to let any thought of me stand in the way. Perhaps you wouldn't anyway. I know you will never forgive me for—well, for that business of Esther's marriage. I have thought about it seems to me every minute since it happened, and tried to look at it every way, and I can't feel that I did wrong. In fact I am surer than ever that I did right. But you don't feel so, I know. Well, that's past and gone. Now about this house Millard and I live in, that I rent from you. If you have a good chance to sell for a good price, and you feel you ought to sell, then you must do it. I can find somewhere else to go just as well as not. Don't you fret about that at all. Promise me you won't."

For the first time since she entered the room his manner changed. Hitherto he had been gruff, defiant, cynically aloof. Now, as she made this appeal, the frown faded from his brow. As she finished he turned his head away. She waited for him to speak, but he did not do so.

"You will sell if you think you ought to, won't you, Foster?" she urged.

He cleared his throat. "There, there," he muttered, hastily. "That's all right, Reliance. I shan't have to turn you out, I guess. Not yet a while, anyhow. Don't be frightened about that."

"I wasn't frightened—not about myself at all. I just wanted to be sure."

"Sshh! Sshh! Forget it. . . . What? Are you going? You don't make long calls, do you? It has been a good while since you made any—up here."

"It isn't any farther from your house to mine than it is from mine to yours. You haven't been droppin' in on me very often. Oh, I don't blame you. I suppose likely I should feel as you do if I were in your place. We are both of us pretty set in our ways. . . . Well, good-by."

He rose. He crossed the room, turned back and spoke. What he said came as a tremendous surprise.

"What is the news from—over yonder?" he asked, gruffly.

"Over where? Why! . . . Do you mean from—from Esther?"

"Yes. I presume likely you get letters, don't you?"

Reliance drew a long breath. "Why—why, yes, I do," she stammered. "She writes me every week."

"Humph! Well, if she can write she hasn't starved to death yet, I take it. How is she getting along?"

"Why, very well, I should say. She lives in Paris and—and she seems to be very happy."

"Um-hum. All right. Good-by."

She turned to go. Then she hesitated.

"Foster," she faltered, "I—"

"Well? What?"

She shook her head. "I was wonderin' if I ought to say it," she confessed. "I guess I will. Foster, in every letter she writes me she asks about you. She wants to know how you are and what you are doin' and—and everything. And in

every one of those letters she asks if I think you would care to have her write you. She wants to do it, Foster. Indeed and indeed she does! Shall I tell her you said she might?"

His answer was prompt.

"I never begged anybody to write me yet," he growled, defiantly. "And I am not beginning now. You and she can understand that."

"Yes—yes, of course I understand. I am awfully glad I came here this afternoon. I was almost afraid to, but I am glad I did. May I come again pretty soon?"

He looked at her intently. "Why do you want to come?" he asked. "I haven't said that I have changed my mind about anything, have I?" Then, before she could reply, he added, brusquely, "Oh, well, come if you want to. I don't know who would be liable to stop you. Far as I can see you generally do what you set out to."

She was content with that, and more than content with his reference to Esther. That evening, after she had locked the post office, she wrote her niece a long letter. She told of the loss of the lawsuit. "Very likely you may have heard of it before you receive this, but I have just come from your uncle's house and the sight of him, alone there, sitting in that library, with nobody to speak to, knowing as he does that everybody is talking about him, some of them crowing over him, facing the fact that he must give up about everything he's got in the world—well, I never wanted to cry over a human creature more. I didn't do it, of course. He would have pushed me outdoors if I had. I couldn't scarcely tell him how sorry I felt. He is as proud as he ever was and he doesn't ask sympathy of anybody. He needs it though. You know how sure he was of winning that suit. For Elisha Cook to beat him is the hardest blow that could have been struck. And not a word of complaint. The one thing he seemed to want me and everybody else to understand was that every dollar damages would be paid cash down."

Then she wrote of his questions concerning Esther's well

being. "Write him, dearie," she urged. "Write him and keep on writing, no matter whether he answers your letters or not. And, oh, if you can, try to comfort him. Make him see that you love him just as much as you ever did. That will help him now more than anything else in the world, I do believe. He is so *all* alone."

The next time she visited the big house she took with her all of Esther's letters, those written from Boston as well as the later arrivals from Paris. She said little about them.

"I brought 'em along," she said, "thinkin' you might like to look 'em over sometime. They are real interestin'. She writes a good letter and what she says about tryin' to make herself understand amongst all those French people is very funny."

He did not answer, nor did he refer to the letters in their conversation. He did not refuse them, however, so she left them on the table when she went away.

By the end of June rumors had changed to certainties. Harniss now knew something of the extent of the disaster which had befallen its great man. Knew it, rather than guessed or imagined it. The acres of pasture land and the square mile of wood lots belonging to Foster Townsend were his no longer. Some of the real estate had gone at private sale; a public auction disposed of much more. The trotters and all the racing paraphernalia were sent to Boston, to be sold by dealers there. The mare, Claribel, Varunas Gifford's especial pride, was bought by Sam Baker; this was the bitterest blow for Varunas. The famous span was sold. Of all the Townsend stable there remained but one horse, and that a sober, middle-aged animal fit only for pulling a carriage. And of all the carriages were left but two, a buggy and a carryall. The Townsend mansion, shorn of its surrounding meadows and pine-sprinkled fields, was still owned and occupied by the man who built it, and the Clark cottage and the acre and a half upon which it stood were still his. For some reason he had refused to sell the cottage property. It seemed odd, for every one knew that he had been offered, and more than once, a good price for it. Its situation

upon the main road and adjoining the post office made it desirable.

The big mogul was no longer big, so far as his possessions were concerned. His progress through his native town was not triumphal now. His closest friends still stood by him, but his influence among the majority was waning. For years unconquerable he had been beaten at last and badly beaten. Elisha Cook had beaten him, even young Griffin had got the better of him. No longer a millionaire, the richest man in the county, he was now estimated to be worth perhaps forty or fifty thousand dollars exclusive of the house he lived in and the Clark cottage. There were a half dozen wealthier men than that in Harniss alone. The old guard among the politicians still came to consult him, but there was a new and younger element gaining strength and influence and they did not consult him at all. The Honorable Alpheus Mooney was their leader now.

Foster Townsend was quite aware of his shrunken importance. Yet there was no change in his manner and attitude. His excursions to and from the stores and the post office were now, for the most part, made on foot, but his step was firm, his dress as carefully chosen, his silk hat as neatly brushed as in the days when that hat was revered by the masses as the crown upon the head of the potentate whom they feared and honored. And his speech was as brusque, his nod as off-hand, his manner of greeting his fellow citizens, high and low, just as uncompromising and stand-offish as ever.

Tobias Eldridge happened to be present at a meeting between Townsend and Congressman Mooney and had much to say about it.

"Mr. Mooney had drove over to see Simeon Thacher about somethin' or other," explained Tobias, "and they was standin' right in the middle of the walk in front of the post office, talkin'. Don't ask me what they was talkin' about, some kind of politics of course— Sim is takin' a whole lot of interest in politics these days. Well, anyhow, there they was when

along the sidewalk comes Cap'n Foster, walkin' just as pompous and important as if old Cook hadn't kicked him all the way home from Washin'ton. Mooney see him comin' and he whispers somethin' to Sim and both of 'em laughed. When the cap'n got abreast of 'em Mooney turned around. "Oh, how are you, Townsend?' he says, kind of as if he wasn't much interested."

Mrs. Eldridge, to whom her husband was telling the story, interrupted.

"Is *that* what he called him—Townsend?" she exclaimed. "Humph! The last time I heard 'em speakin' together was up at the town hall 'most a year ago. 'Twas, 'How do you do, Cap'n Townsend, sir?' then. And if his tongue wasn't buttered from bow to stern then I never heard one that was."

"Wan't no butter on it this time," declared Tobias. "He just says 'How are you?' same as I'd say it to—to Millard Clark. Cap'n Foster never turned a hair. Just looked him over as if, for a minute, he wasn't sure who 'twas. Then he nodded his head. 'Oh, hello, Mooney,' says he. 'Sorry, but I can't talk with you now. I'm in a hurry to get my mail.' Well, Mooney stepped out of the way, but I declare if he didn't look foolish. Yes, and mad. He ain't used to havin' folks shove him to one side much nowadays, I guess."

The important Mr. Mooney was not the only person "shoved to one side" by Foster Townsend. Mrs. Wheeler, whose summer home was opened late in May, called at the mansion soon after her arrival.

"The man was almost rude to me," she confided to Mrs. Colton. "I did practically all the talking while he sat there scarcely saying yes or no. And when I just mentioned to him—I hadn't seen him since it happened, you know—what a shock it was to all of us, the news of his niece's elopement with *that* man of all people, he actually snubbed me. Changed the subject entirely. I shall *never* go near him again."

When Esther replied to her aunt's letter she said that she had written to her uncle and should keep on doing so. "No

matter whether he answers my letters or not," she wrote, "I shall write him just the same. Bob had a note from Mr. Cook's lawyer. It's the first word he has had from his grandfather and even now Mr. Cook did not write the letter himself. But he must have told the lawyer to do it. I suppose he is so brimful of triumph that he couldn't help gloating. Of course he knew Bob would tell me and it was his way of gloating over me, second-hand. Bob is far from gloating. He feels as sorry for poor Uncle Foster as I do. Oh, dear! that awful lawsuit was at the bottom of all our troubles, wasn't it? The lawyer writes that Mr. Cook is far from well."

Reliance continued to call at the Townsend house. Sometimes her calls appeared to be welcome and her chats with Foster Townsend almost bright and cheerful. At others he said practically nothing, and occasionally he sent word by Nabby that he was busy and could not see her. Twice he had dropped in at the cottage—although never when Millard was present, or at the millinery shop where Miss Makepeace might listen to or take part in the conversation. During the first of these calls Reliance mentioned something that Esther had written her. He nodded. "Um-hum," he agreed. "I heard about that."

So she knew he had received and read Esther's letter. It was his sole reference to that letter, however, and she asked no questions. Esther wrote her aunt that he had not replied, but that she should keep on writing just the same.

During his second visit she brought up a subject which had been troubling her.

"Foster," she said, "why don't you sell this house and land? I know you could get a good price for it. Eben Hopkins told me himself that he wants to buy it. Since his house burned down he hasn't got any regular place to live. Why don't you let him buy?"

He shook his head. "That's my business," he said.

"But it is mine, too, in a way. I keep feelin' that you are holdin' on to it just because you don't want to put me and

Millard out. That is silly. I could find another place to go as well as not. Abbie would take me to board. Sometimes I think runnin' a house, as well as 'tendin' post office and a hat shop, is more than I ought to do, anyhow. I am gettin' old and lazy, I guess."

"Um—yes," dryly. "You are about as lazy as a mosquito at camp meeting. What would you do with that half-brother of yours, if you boarded out?"

"I should board him out, too. I guess I could find a place where he could work for his board and keep."

"Humph! When *he* works I'll buy a ticket to watch him. . . . There, there! You stay where you belong."

"But, Foster, you don't make a cent rentin' this house to me. You could get a dozen tenants who would be glad to pay you twice as much. I expect everybody is sayin' that very thing."

He pulled his beard. "I expect they are," he agreed. "Well, my say counts in a few things, even yet. That property is one of 'em. Talk about the weather, Reliance."

One afternoon in early July when Reliance called at the big house she was refused admittance. Nabby said that the captain was not feeling very well and did not want to see any one. It had happened before and Reliance was neither offended nor worried. The next day, however, when she again called and received the same answer she began to think it strange. The following forenoon Millard, returning from an errand to the store, told her a piece of news.

"Old man Townsend is sick, so they say," he announced. "Don't know what's the matter with him. So fur's I'm concerned I don't much care. Cranky old blow-hard! I hope he's got the rheumatics and his shoulder gets to be sore as mine was after he chucked me over that hassock. I'd ought to have sued him for assault and battery that time. I would if it hadn't been for you, Reliance Clark. I might have got some of that money old Cook squeezed out of him."

His half-sister looked at him. "I was talkin' with Seth Francis yesterday," she said. "He says he might ship you for

that Banks' fishin' trip if the rest of his crew would stand for it. He is afraid they wouldn't. He says they're pretty fussy about what they have aboard the schooner. If he could use you for bait, he says—but he can't, the codfish are particular, too."

Millard Fillmore's mouth was closed. His sister's attitude toward him was still anything but reassuring. A dozen times during the past month she had hinted that he might have to go to work and earn his own living. It was high time that sort of thing was forgotten.

Reliance made her third call at the mansion that afternoon and the sight of Doctor Bailey's horse and buggy standing by the gate alarmed her. Nabby, however, would give no particulars.

"He's got a cold or somethin'," she said. "And he just won't have me let anybody in to see him. I sent for the doctor on my own hook and I know he'll give me the very Old Harry for doin' it. Cranky! My good Lord! Oh, dear! And I'm so all alone here, too. Varunas—I presume likely you know it—is workin' down to the livery stable four days a week now. Cap'n Foster made him take the job. Said there wasn't enough to keep him busy around here, and there ain't, of course. He's here nights and that helps a little, but I feel so dreadful lonesome and—and responsible. If the cap'n should be sick—real sick—I don't know what I *would* do. No, no, Reliance, there ain't any use for you to keep runnin' here. He won't see you. I'll let you know if he gets real bad."

So for three days and nights Reliance waited anxiously. Then, on the morning of the fourth day, she found a note tucked under the door leading to the millinery shop. Varunas had left it on his way to the livery stable. It was from Nabby.

"Do come up here soon as ever you can," Mrs. Gifford had written. "I am about crazy. Please come."

Reliance went, of course. Nabby—a white-faced, nervous Nabby—admitted her to the kitchen and poured into her ears a tale which drove the color from her own cheeks. Foster

Townsend was ill, seriously ill, threatened with pneumonia. The doctor was alarmed. He had insisted upon a nurse, but his patient flatly refused to have one in the house.

"I can't do a thing with him," declared the housekeeper, "and Doctor Bailey he can't neither. He's beginnin' to be out of his head part of the time, and when he ain't he vows that if I fetch a hired nurse into this house he'll heave her out of the window. I don't know but he would, too. You know how he is when his mind's sot. And who could I get? The doctor says one of them hospital nurses from Boston, same as took care of poor Mr. Covell; but how can I get one of them? They are so dreadful expensive and I'd have to do it on my own responsibility—and what would he say? And—and that ain't it either, Reliance. He doesn't want anybody. Between you and me," she lowered her voice, "I do believe he don't care two cents what happens to him. Just as soon die as not, I guess. Oh, Reliance, he ain't the way he used to be. He makes out to folks that he is, but he ain't. This—this business about Esther and losin' that law case have—well, they've broke him all to pieces. What *shall* I do? I never was so tired and—and discouraged in my life."

It was some few minutes before Reliance answered. She bade Nabby keep still while she did a little thinking. When, at last, she did speak, her remarks were very much to the point.

For a fortnight Foster Townsend's mind was little concerned with his own affairs or those of any one else. The disease ran its course, of pain and delirium, fever and weakness. When, at last, he turned the corner and began faintly to realize where he was and what was going on about him he noticed that Reliance Clark was sitting in the chair by his bedroom window, sewing. He watched her for a time without speaking. Then he whispered her name.

"Reliance," he murmured, "that's you, isn't it?"

She put down the hat she was trimming and crossed to his bedside.

"Yes, Foster," she said cheerfully, "it is me. My! I am

glad to have you enough better to know who it is. You are goin' to be all right now; the doctor says so."

His condition did not interest him, apparently.

"What in the devil are you doing here?" he whispered.

"Oh, I just came up to see how you were gettin' along. Don't worry about me. And don't try to talk."

He moved his head impatiently on the pillow.

"You were here yesterday, weren't you?" he asked. "Seems as if I remember seeing you."

"Oh, I don't know. I might have been. Now you lie still. Go to sleep, if you can."

He did, after a while. When he awoke it was Nabby who sat by the window. He asked her questions, but the replies were unsatisfying. The following day Reliance was again with him, but he did not question her. She was glad of the omission, but she could not understand it. He was gaining strength hourly and he was now perfectly rational. Why he did not subject her to the cross-examination she expected seemed queer. A week passed and still he did not do so. Nabby reported that he had not tried to learn anything from her.

"He's thinkin' it out himself," she declared. "That would be his way. Some of these days he'll dump down on both of us like a tipcart load of clamshells, see if he don't."

Which was precisely what he did. Reliance came into the room one morning and found him propped in the rocker and awaiting her.

"What have you done to Nabby Gifford?" she asked. "She looks scared to death. What have you been sayin' to her?"

He did not reply. Instead he gave an order, in quite his old way.

"You sit down alongside here," he commanded. "That's right. Now then, let's hear what you have got to say? Nabby has told me her end of the yarn and I dragged what I could out of the doctor. No, no! I'll do the bulk of the talking. You can say yes or no. Do you understand?"

She smiled. "I shouldn't wonder if I did, Foster," she replied. "I'll try to, anyway."

"Humph! All right. Now then; is it true that you have been living in this house for three weeks or more? Taking care of me?"

"Helpin' take care of you—yes. Nabby has done as much—or more."

"What did you do that for?"

"Somebody had to. You told Nabby that you would throw a regular nurse out of the window. I knew you couldn't do that to me."

"Humph! If I had had my senses I should have tried. Who is running the post office?"

"I am. I go down there before the mails come in and when the outgoin' mail has to be got ready. Millard and Abbie are there other times."

"How about your bonnet making?"

"I do my share of that. I have finished two hats right here in this room. They were pretty good-lookin' hats, too, if I do say it."

"Humph! . . . Pshaw! . . . Well, here's the real thing I want to know: Is it true that somebody else—Eben Hopkins's family—are living in that house I rent to you?"

"Why, yes, it is. I couldn't live in it. I had enough to keep me busy up here. Eben is dreadfully anxious to buy that house; you know that. I couldn't sell it to him, for it isn't mine to sell."

"No," emphatically, "you are right, it isn't."

"But I could rent it to him for six months; sublet it at a bigger rent than I pay you, and make a little extra money. So that is what I did. He's taken it furnished, with my things in it. By the time his six months are up he'll want to buy it more than ever, or I miss my guess. If you take my advice you'll sell it to him."

He tried to lean forward in the chair, gave it up and sank back again.

"Do you mean to tell me," he demanded, angrily, "that you have let another tenant into my house without asking me whether you could or not?"

"I couldn't ask you. You were too sick to be asked anything."

"Is there a clause in your lease that gives you the right to sublet?"

She laughed. "You're jokin', Foster," she said. "You know as well as I do that I never had any lease in all the years I have rented from you. The Hopkinses are in and I am out. It's all settled. You are gettin' as much money as you got from me and I am gettin' a little on my own account. Everybody is satisfied, or ought to be. Stop fussin' and behave yourself."

He groaned. "If only I had my strength!" he muttered. "You've got me down and you know it. Tut, tut, tut! What have you done with Millard?"

"He has got a room with Hulda Makepeace, Abbie's sister-in-law. He is supposed to do work enough around the place to pay for his room and meals. I only hope he does it. And between times he is with me at the post office same as always."

"Humph! And you are living up here."

"I am for the present. By and by, when you are well enough so that Nabby can get along alone, I am goin' to have a room with Abbie. She and I will do light housekeepin' together. It's a real sensible arrangement. Don't you think so?"

He did not answer. It was some time before he spoke again. When he did, he said:

"Humph! You're a smart woman, Reliance, but don't you get the idea that I'm such a fool as not to understand what brought you up here. I don't quite understand why you sublet your house. I rather guess there's something behind that you haven't told me. But, according to the doctor, the care you have been taking of me, night and day, is the principal reason why I'm not in the cemetery this minute. What did you do it for? Blamed if I think it was worth while."

"I do. And Doctor Bailey ought to know better than to tell

you any such silly stuff. . . . Well, there! I guess you are well enough to be left a few minutes and I must run and help Nabby. . . Oh, there is a letter on the table for you. It's got a French stamp on it. Here it is. Now you behave yourself till I come back."

CHAPTER XXV

IT was late in August before he was well enough to be about and to take short walks out of doors. Reliance still remained at the big house. He insisted that she do so.

"You stay here," he ordered, "till I tell you to clear out. Nabby needs somebody to help her, I guess. Anyhow she says she does. And I haven't by any means decided what I shall do with that house of yours. You are as comfortable as you will be likely to be with that rattlehead Makepeace woman. You stay right here."

So she stayed on, although she had no intention of prolonging the stay beyond the first of September. He was still far from strong, and was, as Mrs. Gifford called it, "awful cranky," so Reliance thought it best not to upset his equilibrium by mentioning leaving until the time for leaving came.

She and he had many long talks together. Esther's letters to her came regularly and she gave them to him to read, or such parts of them as she thought it best for him to see. And every two weeks there was a letter for him. He invariably put these letters in his pocket and she never saw them again, nor did he refer to them. That he read them when alone she felt certain. So far, Esther wrote, he had not replied. "Why doesn't he write me?" the girl demanded of her aunt. "You say you know he is glad to get my letters. Why doesn't he answer them? I am afraid you are mistaken and that his feeling toward me has not really changed at all. Oh, I wish it would! Just now *especially* I should like to know that it had."

Reliance tried hard to be reassuring.

"It is all right, my dear," she wrote again and again. "He is coming around, but you must be patient and give him time. I have known him a great many more years than you have and I tell you for Foster Townsend to own up that he is wrong

is no easy job. Most of his life he did what he wanted to do and it turned out right, and, what is more, about everybody he knew took pains to tell him it was right. He lost that lawsuit, I know, but there are a good many people even yet who think he was right in that and that the courts made a mistake. He holds his head just as high as he ever did. It is as much as the average person's life is worth to hint they are sorry for him, or anything like that. Let them say that to him just once and they don't get the chance to say much of anything to him again. It is stubborn and foolish, perhaps, but I declare it makes me proud of him. I am a little that way myself, I guess. He has never yet told me out and out that I did right in insisting on you and Bob getting married before you left Harniss that night. But I have said it two or three times and he hasn't contradicted me, and that is a lot—for him. Give him time, Esther, dear. He will write you some day, I am sure. And that he loves you more than all the rest of the world put together, I *know*. Be patient, and keep on writing him. Only don't mention the most important thing. Keep that for a surprise."

She did her best to seem cheerful while in his presence, but there were matters which troubled her—one on the other side of the ocean, although that, in the natural course of events, should end happily—and one, at home in Harniss, which now seemed certain to end disastrously for her. His keen eyes soon noticed, in spite of her pretense, that there was something wrong, and he tried to learn what it was.

"What have you got on your mind, Reliance?" he demanded. "Oh, now, now! don't say you haven't got anything because I know better. What is worrying you?"

She laughingly insisted that she was not worried at all. When he persisted she made an excuse to leave the room. He called after her.

"You are as stubborn as Balaam's jackass," he vowed. "All right. I have got a little of that animal in me. If you won't tell me I shall have to find out for myself."

It was Captain Benjamin Snow who disclosed the secret. Captain Ben, still the loyal friend and as regular a caller at the big house as its owner would permit, took the opportunity when Townsend and he were alone in the library—Nabby having gone to prayer meeting and Reliance to the post office—to speak of what had troubled him for more than a month.

"I should have told you sooner, Foster," he said, "but the doctor wouldn't hear of it. Said you just simply mustn't be bothered, that's all. I wonder somebody hasn't told you when you were down street. The whole town is talkin' about it. It is too late to do anything, I guess; yes, I know it is. But—"

Townsend interrupted. "For heaven's sake!" he exclaimed, testily. "Stop running around the mainmast and get some sail on her. Come to the point, Ben. What are you trying to say?"

Captain Ben said it then. Reliance Clark was to lose her place as postmistress. The time for her reappointment was at hand and that reappointment would not be made. Congressman Mooney had taken the matter into his own hands and he had picked Simeon Thacher for the office. Thacher was the Honorable Mooney's friend and henchman. He had earned reward and now he was to have it. Rival petitions had been circulated; Reliance's friends had rallied and her petition was much the longer of the two. But Thacher had the inside pull at Washington and his was the winning side.

"We are all of us, all the best folks in town, as sorry as we can be, Foster," declared Captain Ben. "We all like Reliance and she has made a first-rate postmistress, but what can you do against politics? They've trumped up charges, of course, said Millard was no good as assistant, and that is true enough, but those charges don't cut any figure. It's Mooney's drag with the Washin'ton folks that has done the trick. He is smart and a coming man in the party, everybody says so. He is getting to be the county boss, that is what he is getting to be."

Foster Townsend had listened with, for him, surprising patience. Now he broke in.

"What!" he cried. "He is, eh? County boss already! I

want to know! . . . Ben Snow, how long has this been going on? What do you mean by keeping it from me?"

Snow shook his head. "First I heard of it was just before you were taken sick, Foster," he said. "That's when it came out, but I guess it was going on, underneath, a long, long while before that. And then, after you was sick, I couldn't see you, of course. And, even now, if the doctor knew—"

"Blast the doctor! . . . Sshh! Let me think. Does Reliance know about it?"

"Sartin. Of course she does. She—"

"Yes, yes. Of course she does. That is what she's had on her mind. Humph! I knew there was something. Thacher hasn't got his papers yet, has he?"

"No. But I guess he has just as good as got 'em. He is expecting them any time."

"Humph! Expecting is one thing and getting is another. There, there! Don't talk any longer. Clear out. I've got to think—yes, and do."

"But, Foster, what can you do? What can anybody do? And you aren't fit to—"

"Sshh! You haven't been to my funeral yet, have you? No. Well, neither has Mooney. Run along, Ben, rùn along! And say, don't you tell a soul that I know anything about this. Reliance especially; don't you tell her."

Captain Snow left his friend's house in a peculiar state of mind. His conscience troubled him a little. Foster Townsend was still far from strong. If, under the spur of this disclosure, he should attempt exertions which brought about a relapse, he—Snow—would be to blame. And, after all, what had been gained by telling? Nothing could be done. As he had just said, what could any one do? Nevertheless, amid Captain Ben's perturbations there was a faint trace of unreasonable hope. For many years he, like so many other Harniss citizens, had depended upon Foster Townsend to steer their ship through the shoals of politics. And the trust had never been misplaced.

Of course, now, everything was different. Yet the captain could not help hoping—a little.

That evening, just before he went up to his room, Townsend astonished his housekeeper by announcing that he desired an early breakfast. "Have it ready at six," he ordered. "And tell Varunas to have the horse and buggy at the door as soon as I've finished. I want to make the quarter to seven train."

Nabby stared at him, horror-stricken.

"My soul and body!" she exclaimed. "Cap'n Foster, be you crazy? You ain't much more than just up off a sick bed. Where are you goin'—in a train? What'll I tell Doctor Bailey? Yes, and Reliance?"

Her employer grinned. "Tell Bailey I have gone to China for my health," he announced. "According to you I should have to go as far as that to find it. And don't you tell Reliance that I have gone at all, until after you have heard the engine whistle. Then you can tell 'em all you know—which won't be much."

He caught the train, and Varunas, having seen him and his valise safely aboard, returned home baffled and pessimistic.

"No, no," he told his wife, "he wouldn't tell me nothin'. *Asked* him! Course I asked him; but all he would say was 'Shut up.' When he said it the third time I could see he meant it. . . . Ah hum! I don't never expect to see him again, alive. If he ain't crazy then everybody will say we are for lettin' him go."

Three days—four—and five passed without a message of any sort from the traveler. Acting under Miss Clark's orders, and her instructions were insistent, the occupants of the big house told no one, save the doctor, of Townsend's mysterious and alarming absence. But few had seen him take the train at the station, and, as he bought no ticket, they took it for granted that he had gone but a little way, probably to Ostable, and that Varunas was to drive to that town later in the day and bring him home. Foster Townsend's daily doings were no longer a matter of overwhelming importance to Harniss in

general. His losing the lawsuit was an old story. The big mogul was shorn of most of his bigness. It did not now matter greatly what he did.

In his own home, however, there was increasing worry and a growing fear. Nabby declared that she was so nervous she couldn't keep her mind on her work. "I'll p'ison us all some of these meals," she said. "I give the cat mashed turnip yesterday and 'twan't till the critter turned up his nose at it that I found I was puttin' raw liver on the dinner table." Varunas was quite as distraught. Reliance Clark was more composed, but she was very anxious.

On the morning of the sixth day came a telegram. It was addressed to Mr. Gifford. "Meet me with the team at the South Denboro station seven ten to-night," it read. Why he should have chosen to alight at South Denboro instead of keeping on to Harniss no one of the three could understand, but the fact that he was still alive was reassuring. Varunas and the horse and buggy were on hand a half hour ahead of the time set. At a little before nine Foster Townsend reëntered his own dining room.

Nabby had expected to meet a physical wreck, a pale and haggard shadow whose one desire would be to be helped to bed as soon as possible. Her eyes and mouth opened in astonishment.

"Well, I declare, Cap'n Foster!" she gasped. "I do declare! I snum if you ain't—I do believe you look *better* than you done when you went out of this house."

Townsend smiled. "I am better," he said. "Nothing like travel, Nabby."

In spite of her questions and Reliance's when, later on, the latter came back from the post office, he would not disclose one atom of information as to where he had been so long or why.

"Never you mind," he insisted, and with surprising good nature. "That's my business. I am not married to either one of you. I am free and independent. I guess likely I can go off on a spree if I want to without doing my catechism afterwards.

I have had a good time and maybe I'll have a better one by and by. You be satisfied with that."

They had to be. Neither then, nor the following day, nor the day after that, would he say more. It was tantalizing to the Giffords, but Reliance did not mind so much. She was grave and preoccupied nowadays and Nabby and her husband thought they understood the reason. Captain Townsend, apparently, did not notice her gravity or long intervals of silence.

His trips to the post office were very regular. One noon he came home to dinner with, so Nabby thought, a more than usually satisfied expression. In fact he seemed, for him, almost excited.

"I don't know what has changed him so lately, Varunas," she confided. "Must have been that 'spree' he went on, whatever it was. He is more like himself—his old smart, lively self, I mean—than I've seen him since Esther ran off and married that Griffin thing."

Varunas had something to say. "You know what that letter was he give me to mail just now?" he asked. "The one he wrote right after dinner? No? Well, I don't neither, but I know who 'twas to. 'Twas to the Honorable Alpheus Mooney, Trumet, Mass. That's who 'twas to; and he was mighty anxious I should stop in and mail it on my way to the livery stable. What in time is he writtin' to Congressman Mooney for? Don't cal'late he's goin' to get some political job, or somethin', do you—now that he's lost his money?"

One evening soon afterward, when Reliance Clark came home after locking the post office door, she found Foster Townsend in the library. He was seated in the easy-chair and the *Item* was in his hand. He looked up and spoke.

"Tired to-night, are you, Reliance?" he asked. "In a special hurry to go aloft and turn in?"

"No, Foster. Why?"

"Because, if you had just as soon, I'd like to have you wait up a while. I am sort of expecting somebody here to see me

to-night and I'd rather like to have you around where I can call you if I want you."

She did not understand, of course, nor, just then, was she particularly curious. There were other matters on her mind, one matter so transcendently important that she could think of nothing else.

"I can wait as well as not," she told him. "In fact, I was goin' to sit up anyway. I've got somethin' to tell you, Foster. Somethin' wonderful. I had a letter come in to-night's mail. You had one, too. I've got them both here."

She had the letters in her hand. He looked at them, then at her face.

"From—from the other side?" he asked, quickly.

"Yes."

"From—her?"

"Yes. One of them."

"Humph! What makes you look so queer? Say, there's nothing—nothing wrong, is there?"

She shook her head.

"No. No, Foster," she said, "there is nothin' wrong. Everything is all right. Thank God for it."

He leaned forward. "What are you thanking God for?" he demanded. "And—here— Are you crying? I believe you are. What—"

Just then Nabby Gifford bustled into the library. She had not announced her coming; she was too excited for that.

"Who do you suppose is out here, waitin' to see you, Cap'n Foster?" she whispered. "The Honorable Mooney, that's who."

Townsend's reception of this announcement was disappointing, to say the least.

"Humph!" he grunted. "I thought it must be Saint Peter, judging by your face. Tell him to come in. Yes, yes. Go and tell him."

He turned to Reliance. "Reliance," he said, "I want you to hear this. You go in the parlor and leave the door open a crack. Don't mind sitting in the dark a few minutes, do you?"

She started toward the parlor. Then she turned and looked at him fixedly and with growing suspicion.

"Foster," she said, sharply, "what is all this? Have you—What have you been doin'?"

He waved her away. "Keep your ears open and maybe you'll find out," he suggested. "Hurry up! I don't want him to see you—yet."

Congressman Alpheus Mooney had not honored that room with his presence for almost a year. That he now considered himself as honoring it was quite apparent. Bowed in by the reverential Mrs. Gifford he entered briskly and with importance. When he last crossed the threshold of the Townsend house he had been an anxious candidate for office, humbly seeking aid and advice from the most influential man in his district. Then he came hat in hand. His hat was in his hand now, but he tossed it lightly upon the table without waiting for an invitation.

"Good evening, Cap'n Townsend," he said. "Well, here I am, you see."

"Glad to see you, Mooney," declared the captain. "It was good of you to come. You are pretty busy these days, I expect. Have a chair."

Mooney took the chair which was offered him. He crossed his knees.

"Why, yes," he admitted. "Yes, I am pretty busy just now, that's a fact. Never too busy to oblige an old friend though. I happened to be in Trumet when your letter came and I was very glad to drive up and see you. I was sorry to hear of your sickness. You look quite like yourself again. As well as you ever did, I should say."

If there was a very slight hint of patronage in the Congressman's manner it was no more than should be expected of a Congressman. And in this case it was unintentional. The Honorable Mooney was not wholly at ease concerning the purpose of this interview to which he had been summoned. The letter he had received was brief and polite. If Mr. Mooney could make it convenient to drop in at the Harniss house some

evening soon, Foster Townsend would consider his doing so a favor. There was a little matter, of interest to both, to be talked over. He—Townsend—had not been well or he should come to Trumet. Mooney had replied by telegraph naming this Wednesday evening at nine. And in the interval between the receipt of the letter and that moment he had been wondering what the little matter of interest might be. There was but one which offered itself as a probability, and that little matter was all right, settled beyond change. Nevertheless—well, the Honorable Alpheus was not entirely free from curiosity, perhaps even from anxiety.

Foster Townsend received the gratifying assurance concerning his robust appearance with a rather dubious shake of the head.

"I don't know, Mooney," he observed. "When a man of my age has been as sick as I was he doesn't get up again in a minute. However, I'm not dead, and that is something. No, I'm not even as dead as—well, as some folks think I am. Have a cigar?"

Mooney accepted the cigar. Townsend also took one and they lit and smoked. The captain mentioned the fine weather they had for the past few days, also the promise of a good cranberry crop that fall.

"You will be glad of that, Mooney," he observed. "Everybody knows you are the father of that cranberry bill that has done so much for us in this section."

The Congressman glanced at him. The Townsend face was grave, there was not even the faintest twinkle in the Townsend eye. Nevertheless Mr. Mooney's slight uneasiness became a shade less slight. Was this man making fun of him? It was time he found out.

"Yes—yes, of course," he said. "Well, Cap'n Townsend," leaning easily back in his chair and knocking the ashes from his cigar, "what was it you wanted to talk over with me? A little politics, eh?"

Townsend nodded. "You've guessed it," he said. "It was

a little matter of politics. I never should have dared bother as busy a man as you are with anything but business."

This was overdoing it a trifle. Mooney was not an absolute fool and his suspicion that he was being made fun of became more of a certainty. He cleared his throat, and frowned slightly.

"I see," he said, more brusquely. "Yes, I see. . . . Well, Cap'n Townsend, for old times' sake I should like to oblige you if I can. What do you want? What can I do for you?"

Townsend blew a cloud of smoke and fanned it from before his face with his hand.

"You can't do anything for me, Mooney," he answered. "You've done all you can do for me by coming here to-night. As far as that is concerned I could have managed to get along if you hadn't come. . . . So," with an ominous change in his tone, "I wouldn't put it just that way if I were you. Mooney, when you started to pitch Reliance Clark out of our post office and squeeze Sim Thacher into it why did you do it behind my back? Why did you hide it from me?"

So it was the post office matter, after all. In a way Mooney was relieved. That battle was won. His countenance assumed an expression of pained resentment.

"Nonsense, Cap'n Townsend," he said, with lofty indignation. "Nonsense! Whoever told you I have been hiding anything—lied, that's all. You were sick—"

"Here, here! I may have been sick along the last of it, but not at first when you and Thacher were laying your plans. I know as much about those plans as you do, I guess. I have made it my business to find out. You started planning away last December, a month after you were elected to Washington. Before that election you were crawling around here on your hands and knees, begging me to please do this and that to help you get votes. Why, confound you, you couldn't have been nominated if it hadn't been for me. And away back in the beginning, when that cranberry bill had you licked so that you couldn't have been elected poundkeeper, I gave you the chance to square yourself. I was the fool there, of course; but I thought

you were so scared you would behave yourself for the rest of your life. Bah! Don't you say 'nonsense' to me again. . . . Here! You aren't going yet. This little talk of ours has only begun."

The Honorable Alpheus was on his feet, his round face crimson. He snatched his hat from the table.

"I don't want to hear any more from you, Townsend," he declared. "You are a sick man—and an old man. If you weren't—"

"Here! here! I'm not sick. And I'm not so darned old that I can't see through a jellyfish. I saw through you the first time you came into this room. And I saw through what you were up to with this post-office business the minute I heard of it. You probably as good as promised Sim Thacher the post office away back when you were hunting the nomination. You would have come to me about it months ago if you hadn't figured I was down and out and not worth considering any more. Elisha Cook and the Supreme Court had licked me, and so you thought you could do it. Pshaw!" in huge disgust; "Elisha Cook is a *man,* whatever else he is."

The Honorable Mooney drew himself erect. His chest expanded.

"Townsend," he declaimed, with all the dignity of his platform manner, "I make allowances for you. I realize you are not well. And I suppose it is natural you should be disappointed because your friend—your housekeeper I am told she is now—has lost the post office here. I am sorry for her myself, in a way. But I have the interests of the folks I represent in Congress to consider. It is my duty to think of them and act for their good. Miss Clark has not—no, sir, she has *not* run that office as it ought to be run. She has neglected it. More than that, she has been spending the public money to hire that worthless brother of—"

"Sshh!" Foster Townsend brought his palm down upon his knee with a crack which startled the representative of an outraged people to silence. "Be still!" ordered the captain. He

slowly shook his head. "Well, there!" he went on, in a calmer tone. "That was a real pretty speech of yours, but you needn't finish it; I can guess the end. I have said more than I meant to say, myself. No use wasting time. Although," with another momentary outburst, "when I think of how you and your gang worked and schemed to put a lone woman out of her job, I—Humph! . . . Mooney, she isn't going to be put out of it. She is going to stay right where she is."

The Honorable Alpheus stared. Then he smiled, a smile of dignified pity.

"Townsend," he proclaimed, loftily, "I don't see what you hope to gain by this sort of thing. Simeon Thacher will be the Harniss postmaster. The appointment is made—or as good as made. That is my final word to you."

Townsend lifted his hand. "Better wait until you hear mine, Mooney," he said, warningly. "I was fussing with politics when you were running to school and I have learned enough to know that nothing political is done until it has *been* done. . . . I went up to see Senator Gore last week. He and I are old friends."

A change came over Mr. Mooney's face. It lost something of its confidence, its high disdain.

"Well—well, I am very glad you did," he asserted, after an instant's pause. "Yes, indeed. The Senator is a friend of mine, too, I am proud to say. He knows all about this post office matter. I advised with him before I made up my own mind."

And now it was Townsend who smiled. He seemed amused.

"Oh, so you 'advised' with him, did you?" he chuckled. "Well, your advice must have been worth listening to. . . . There, there! Wait a minute more. *I* 'advised' with the Senator myself. And he seemed to be interested. He ought to be. I knew him before he was Senator. I've done him a good many favors down here in this district. He hadn't forgotten them. A good memory is a mighty valuable item of cargo to have aboard, if you are cruising in politics. That's

a piece of advice I'll hand over to you, Mooney, and I won't charge for it. Senator Gore remembers favors. *He* is a big man."

The Congressman would have spoken, but the captain did not give him the opportunity.

"Just a minute now," he said. "I'm almost through. I told the Senator the straight truth about our post office here. He was surprised. I judged it was different from what he had heard from you. He said he could not understand, considering the story you told him. I said that, according to my experience, you were subject to changes of mind at times. By the way of proof I showed him some letters you wrote me two or three years ago. His name was in those letters. Perhaps you remember—you were a little peeved because he hadn't used his influence in a matter you were interested in and you spoke out pretty plain. I wouldn't say the names you called him were compliments, exactly. So—"

But Mooney could hold in no longer. His dignity was gone and with it his confident assurance.

"You showed him those letters!" he shouted. "Why—why, those were personal letters. What do you mean by—"

"Sshh! No they weren't. You asked me to show them to other people and to do what I could to help you upset the Senator's plans. Anyhow, I needed 'em to prove my case, just as, I suppose, to prove yours you felt it necessary to say what you did about Reliance Clark's misusing the Government money and things like that. Never mind what you said about me. I could answer that without the help of anybody's letters. So—well, to make a long yarn shorter, Senator Gore said he could see I was right and that he would help me. I said the help must be prompt or it would be too late. He made it prompt. The President himself happened to be in New York last week, maybe you saw it in the papers. He was there and the Senator took me to see him. It seemed a kind of a shame to bother the President of this whole United States with a little two-for-a-cent mess like the Harniss post office, but—well, he

was patient and so—Reliance!" he called, raising his voice. "Reliance, you can come in now. I have got something for you."

The parlor door swung open and Miss Clark appeared. Her expression was peculiar, but not nearly as peculiar as that of the Honorable Alpheus Mooney when he recognized her.

Foster Townsend took from the inside pocket of his coat a folded, official-looking document. He handed it to her. She took it mechanically.

"There is your notice of reappointment, Reliance," he said. "It wasn't really necessary, maybe. They might have let you stay on without it, perhaps; I don't just know how such things are worked although I have had a hand in a good many appointments of different kinds. But I asked the Senator to have something sent and sent to me. I thought I'd like the fun of giving it to you, and I thought, too, if it was done here, privately, between us three, it might save our friend Mr. Mooney from having to make a lot of public explanations. I don't know exactly why I should do you a favor, Mooney," he added, cheerfully, "but I am glad to do this one. Want to see the paper, do you? I guess Miss Clark will show it to you, though you can take my word for it that it is perfectly straight."

The Congressman did not ask to see the paper. He asked for nothing and said nothing. He seemed to be in a daze and when Townsend picked up the hat which he had dropped he took it without a word.

He departed, a moment or two later, and the captain accompanied him to the outer door. Townsend was smiling when he reëntered the library.

"I should be a little sorry for that fellow," he observed, "if he hadn't behaved so like a swelled-up bullfrog. He is in for a joyful time with Thacher and the rest of them. Maybe it will be good for him, though. I guess likely he will be a little more careful about the kind of letters he writes."

He looked at Reliance. She had unfolded the document

from Washington and was reading it, or trying to do so. Her hands were trembling. Townsend looked away.

"I gave the Honorable one little piece of parting advice," he added, with another chuckle. "I told him what I told Ben Snow, that it was generally good policy to wait until after a man was buried before you took it for granted he was dead."

He stretched out his arms and laughed aloud.

"That did me good!" he declared. "That did me a world of good. I guess maybe I never was dead, after all. Or else I am just coming to life again."

He turned once more to Miss Clark. She was still gazing at the paper in her hands.

"Well, Reliance," he said, "that is off your mind. You can sort letters for a while longer anyhow. Are you glad?"

She sighed. "I—I don't know what I am, hardly, yet," she confessed. "Oh, Foster, how am I ever—*ever* goin' to pay you for this?"

"I don't want any pay. The debt was all on my side. I owe you a whole lot more yet. You foolish woman! Why didn't you tell me what was going on? What would you have done for a living if they had put you out of that post office?"

She tried to smile. "I should have got along some way," she said. "I had planned it pretty well out. I should have boarded with Abbie—I am going to do that anyhow—and worked harder at the millinery, that is all. I would have got along."

"Yes," with a disgusted grunt, "you would have got along; all creation couldn't stop your doing that, I guess. But what kind of a get-along would it have been? This is why you sublet your house, of course. I knew there was something behind that. . . . Now you aren't going boarding down at Abbie Makepeace's. You are going to stay right here. There is plenty of room. Nabby needs you to help. Yes, you are going to stay. You will stay—at least until the time comes when I put those Hopkinses out of your own place and you go back there to live, where you ought to be."

"No, Foster—"

"I say *yes!* Confound it! Let me have my own way once in a while, won't you?"

This was like the old Foster Townsend, the big mogul. Her smile broadened. He noticed it and smiled also.

"Sit down over there a minute, Reliance," he ordered. "I want to talk to you."

She took the rocker so recently vacated by the Honorable Mooney. He sank into the leather chair and stretched his legs. She waited for him to speak, but he did not.

"Well, Foster," she asked, after a moment, "what is it?"

He jingled the change in his pocket, the old habit of his. He appeared a little uneasy.

"Well?" she repeated.

He lifted his head. "What I have got to say is—well, confound it, it is hard to say," he began. "For me, anyhow. Reliance, I suppose you think I've got a grudge against you for—that business of Esther's. I haven't."

"I am glad of that, Foster."

She *was* glad, especially glad to hear him say it. In spite of her assurances to Esther, she had begun to think he never would.

"Don't you misunderstand me," he went on, sharply. "I am no more in favor of her marrying that Griffin cub than I ever was. She made a big mistake there. If she had left it to me I could have found her a husband that was something more than a picture dauber. You bet I could! And he wouldn't have been a Cook either."

There was much she might have said, much she wanted to say, but she thought it inadvisable just then.

"We all of us make mistakes, Foster," was her only comment.

"Humph! Yes, we do. I have made a lot in my life. Well, if I had it to live over again, I would make the same ones, I shouldn't wonder. I am built that way. I can no more help bossing other people's affair than I can help breathing. I

like to do it, always did. I don't know as it pays, though."

"I don't believe it does, Foster."

"It paid with Mooney just now, didn't it? . . . Oh, well, you may be right. I certainly haven't made what you might call a first-class job of it for the last three or four years. . . . Well, that wasn't what I started to say. Reliance, you did one first-class job that night when you made Esther and—and that fellow of hers get married before they left Harniss. Get married right in your own house, with you to stand by and see them sign articles. That saved talk—and dirty, mean talk that might have hung around the girl all her life."

"That is the way I felt about it."

"Um-hum. Well, it is the way I feel—have felt since it happened. I haven't told you so because—well, because."

"I understand."

"Yes, I guess you do; you ought to know me by this time. . . . What's the matter now?"

She had risen from the rocker. "Those letters!" she exclaimed. "Mine—and that one for you! I must have left them in the parlor. That talk between you and Mr. Mooney made me forget them altogether. I wouldn't have believed anything could make me forget *those*."

She ran to the parlor and returned, the letters in her hand.

"Here is yours," she said.

He took it from her. "What is all this?" he demanded. "You were crying when you started to give it to me before. I believe you are crying now. What in the name of—"

"Read it," she urged. "Please read it. We can talk about it afterwards."

He tore open the envelope. She hurried to the dining room and remained there for perhaps five minutes. When she came back he was sitting there, his hand resting on his knee and the letter—Esther's letter—between his fingers. His attitude reminded her of that dreadful evening in her own sitting-room when she had returned to find him after he had read that other letter from his niece.

He heard her enter and looked up.

"Well!" he observed, with a slow shake of the head. "Well! here is another surprise package for me. Here is another thing you have been keeping from me, eh?"

"I couldn't help it, Foster. Esther and I both thought it was best not to tell you. We were afraid you might be worried."

"Humph! So you thought you would do all the worrying for the pair of us. That is like you, I must say. Did Esther write you? You said you had a letter—from her."

"Mine wasn't from her. Bob wrote me. But he said Esther insisted on writing you herself. She couldn't write much of course—not yet. I suppose it wasn't a long letter."

"Not very."

"But, Foster, isn't it wonderful? It doesn't seem as if it could be so, does it?"

He sniffed. "Why, I don't know as it is so tremendously wonderful," he replied. "About what was to be expected sometime or other, I should say."

"But—but, Foster, did you read it *all*? Didn't she write you about her—about their—about Mr. Cook?"

He turned the letter over. "Um-hum," he grunted. "She wrote that Cook was in a pretty bad way and that he has asked to have his grandson come and see him."

"Yes, but she and—and the baby will come, too, of course."

"Humph! . . . The old scamp must have had a change of heart. Ready to forget and forgive, maybe, like the rich old granddads, or whatever they were, in the Sunday School books. Well, he can afford to forgive. He *is* rich, blast him! That is, provided the lawyers haven't got the whole of the plunder."

She waited a moment longer. Then she leaned toward him.

"Is that all you've got to say?" she asked, anxiously. "I shall have to write Esther, you know, and she will want to be told everything."

He did not appear to have heard. He was absently folding

the letter. Suddenly he spoke, but to himself more than to her. "I wonder who the young shaver looks like," he muttered.

It was very little, but it was enough. Reliance was satisfied. She could await Esther's homecoming with a light heart.

(1)

THE END

STORIES BY JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

QUEER JUDSON—Carey Judson, a square peg in a round hole, returns from Boston to Cape Cod and at length finds happiness and contentment.

RUGGED WATER—Old Cape Cod days with Calvin Homer rising to the position of Captain of the life-saving station.

DOCTOR NYE—North Ostable revises its opinion of its black sheep.

FAIR HARBOR—An old sea captain becomes manager of a home for Mariners' Women.

GALUSHA THE MAGNIFICENT—A lovable archeologist brings great results to a Cape Cod village.

THE PORTYGEE—The temperament and "calf love" of the son of a Spanish opera singer make difficulties with his Yankee grandfather.

SHAVINGS—The loyalty and shrewdness of a quaint windmill-maker bring happiness to his friends.

MARY-'GUSTA—An orphan girl persists in mothering two old sea captains—her guardians.

EXTRICATING OBEDIAH—Cap'n Noah Newcomb extricates his former cabin boy from the dangers involved in unexpectedly inheriting a fortune.

THANKFUL'S INHERITANCE—Thankful Barnes and her helper lose their boarders when the house proves "ha'nted," but they gain a sea captain and a young lawyer—for life.

KENT KNOWLES: QUAHAUG—A search for a distant cousin, "Frank," who proves to be "Frances," radically alters a man who resembles the quahaug.

CAP'N DAN'S DAUGHTER—She rescues him from her mother's social ambitions by burlesquing the good lady's own doings.

MR. PRATT'S PATIENTS—Mr. Pratt and his friend Miss Sparrow introduce original methods in the Sea Breeze Bluff Sanitorium for Rest and Right Living.

Each, $2.00

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

New York London

STORIES BY JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

THE RISE OF ROSCOE PAINE—A New Yorker and his daughter seek simple living on Cape Cod, and find adventure and romance.

THE POSTMASTER—A retired sea captain finds plenty of activity in the position of postmaster.

CAP'N WARREN'S WARDS—Cap'n Warren finds himself in strange waters as guardian to a niece and nephew brought up in snobbish New York society.

THE WOMAN-HATERS—Two avowed woman-haters clear up misunderstandings that have made them so.

THE DEPOT MASTER—The depot master, who sees all that goes on, becomes involved in tangled love affairs.

KEZIAH COFFIN—An old maid proves a good angel to a minister in his courtship and turns out not incurably an old maid.

CY WHITTAKER'S PLACE—An old bachelor adopts a little girl and with an old crony forms a "Board of Strategy" for her upbringing.

THE "OLD HOME HOUSE"—Eleven stories about two sea captains and their "Old Home House" for summer boarders.

MR. PRATT—Mr. Pratt gives two young New Yorkers pointers on how to lead the natural life.

PARTNERS OF THE TIDE—The surprising adventures and difficulties of Cap'n Titcomb and young Bradley Nickerson in the wrecking business.

CAP'N ERI—Adventures begin for Cap'n Eri and his two friends when they decide that one of them must marry to provide a housekeeper for the three.

OUR VILLAGE—A series of unforgetable little sketches, describing Cape Cod life thirty years ago.

CAPE COD BALLADS—Old Cape Cod scenes and folk appear in over eighty verses.

Each, $2.00

Illustrated Edition of
"OUR VILLAGE" *and* **"CAPE COD BALLADS"**
in two volumes, $3.50 per set

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
New York **London**

FICTION OF NOTABLE QUALITY

HERE AND BEYOND

By EDITH WHARTON, author of "The Mother's Recompense," etc. Six significant stories by this famous author. The reader passes from austere New England to sun-scorched Morocco in this beautifully balanced and varied group of tales. Three of them are "psychic" in nature. $2.50.

AFTER NOON

By SUSAN ERTZ, author of "Madame Claire." A charming tale of delightful people. Charles Lester, old enough to have grown daughters, is yet young enough to find new adventure for himself. $2.00.

UPROOTED

By BRAND WHITLOCK. A study in contrasts between the American transplanted abroad and the truly native sort. $2.00.

CAPTAIN FRACASSE

By THEOPHILE GAUTIER. A splendid translation of this great French classic. A dashing romance of the days when Louis XIII was King of France and Richelieu was his Prime Minister. $2.50.

WHAT IS TO BE

By J. C. SNAITH. Carmania, that worthy neighbor of the beloved kingdoms of Zenda and Graustark is the scene of most the action that involves a whimsical Englishman and a Balkan princess. $2.00.

TINSEL

By CHARLES HANSON TOWNE. Della Nesbit having outgrown her home town takes her family to storm the citadels of Newport and Palm Beach society. $2.00.

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

NEW YORK LONDON

FICTION OF HIGH QUALITY

QUEER JUDSON

By JOSEPH C. LINCOLN. Carey Judson, a lovable Cape Codder, a square peg in a round hole, returns from Boston to his native Wellmouth where he at length finds happiness and contentment. $2.00.

SHELTER

By CHARLES FIELDING MARSH. A dramatic, moving story of the loves and passions of a woman and two men in picturesque rural England. $2.00.

THE ETERNAL CIRCLE

By JAY WILLIAM HUDSON. The story of two men and two women whose fortunes are caught in the embrace of love, the eternal circle. $2.00.

THE RIM OF THE PRAIRIE

By BESS STREETER ALDRICH. The love story of Nancy Moore—a winsome daughter of the prairie —as she returns to Maple City for a last visit before her marriage only to have her plans changed in amazing fashion. $2.00.

29 LOVE STORIES

Edited by ERNEST RHYS and C. A. DAWSON-SCOTT. A singularly appealing collection of stories by twenty-nine authors, unified by the theme of love. $2.50.

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

NEW YORK LONDON

ADVENTURE AND MYSTERY

THE LOVE OF MADEMOISELLE

By GEORGE GIBBS. A romance of adventure and love in the days when Spanish galleons sailed the seas, when Huguenots fled from France, and Florida was a wilderness. $2.00.

THE NUMBER ONE BOY

By JOHN TAINTOR FOOTE. During the Boxer rebellion a serene Chinese priest plays his part in protecting two young Occidentals. $1.75.

THE BLUE CAR MYSTERY

By NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN. Detection-proof mystery that keeps the reader in a rare state of suspense and surmise. $2.00.

TREASURE ROYAL

By WILLIAM GARRETT. A cipher and map in a murdered man's pockets leads to a treasure hunt and weird adventure. $2.00.

THE COMING OF COSGROVE

By LAURIE YORK ERSKINE. A rapid-fire, vigorous story of the conflict between might and right and the question whether crime and violence shall be the order of the range or law and justice. $2.00.

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

NEW YORK LONDON

GOOD STORIES

THE SHIP OF SOULS

By EMERSON HOUGH, author of *"The Covered Wagon,"* etc. A gripping story of wilderness love and frontier adventure laid in an isolated fur-trading post in Northern Canada. $2.00.

MAD MARRIAGE

By GEORGE GIBBS. A novel of modern life in which an artist meets two different kinds of love. $2.00.

WILD HARVEST

By JOHN M. OSKISON. An invigorating story of the bold early days when the Oklahoma prairies were first being tamed. $2.00.

THE CRUISE OF THE CACHALOT

By FRANK T. BULLEN. One of the greatest sea stories ever written. "Immense," Rudyard Kipling calls it. A new edition with stunning color illustrations. $2.00.

THE MISSING INITIAL

By NATALIE SUMNER LINCOLN. A baffling mystery in which an initial torn from a handkerchief plays an important part. $1.75.

THE MYSTERY OF THE SINGING WALLS

By WILLIAM AVERILL STOWELL. A mystery story about a wealthy old man who is shot in a closed room among friends. $2.00.

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

NEW YORK LONDON

RECENT NOVELS

THOMAS THE IMPOSTOR

By JEAN COCTEAU. The story of a dazzling liar with a taste for escapades, who seeks to make his deeds match his words. $1.75.

MOCKBEGGAR

By LAWRENCE W. MEYNELL. A novel of wit and brilliance, painting smart London and the incomparable Rachael Massinger in shining colors. $2.00.

LAST YEAR'S NEST

By DOROTHY À BECKETT TERRELL. A charming novel in which a mother marries a man as young as her grown daughter. $2.00.

COBWEB PALACE

By ROSAMUND NUGENT. A romance of youth in which a childhood love persists. $2.00.

MAC IVOR'S FOLLY

By HUGH MCNAIR KAHLER and DONALD GRANT HERRING. A novel of the Carolina sandhills and a stubborn Scotchman. $2.00.

SUNKEN GOLD

By ANDRÈ SAVIGNON. Mystery and real thrills fill this tale of hidden treasure in the English Channel. $1.75.

THE CONFIDENCE MAN

By LAURIE YORK ERSKINE. A real crook comedy, making delightful entertainment out of a game which a "confidence man" directs against the richest citizen of a small town. $2.00.

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY

NEW YORK LONDON